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WHEN OUTLAWS RIDE
A Texas Ranger Novelet
By BRADFORD SCOTT

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A THRILLING PUBLICATION

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A Swap and Whopper Novelet
By SYL MacDOWELL

BRUSH POPPERS
An Action Novelet
By JOHNSTON McCULLEY

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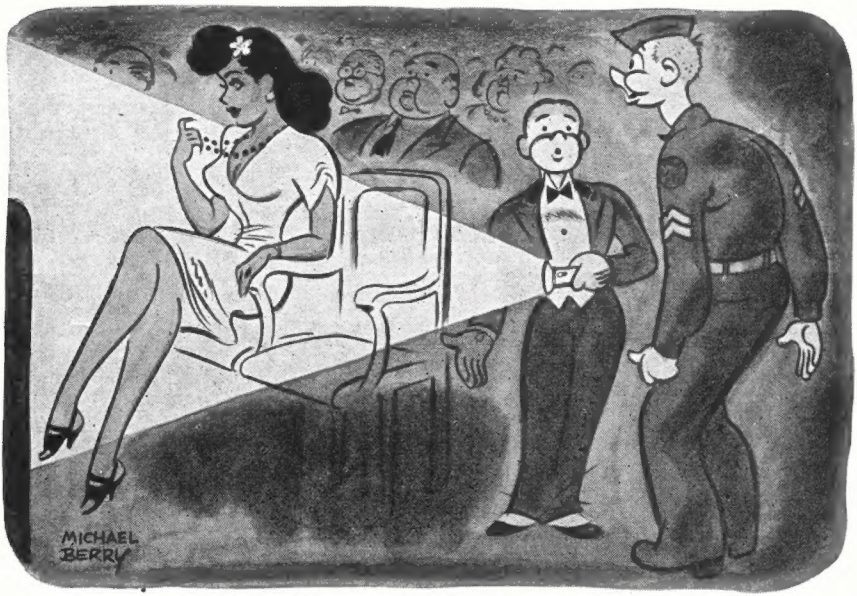

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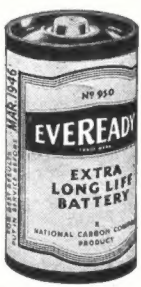

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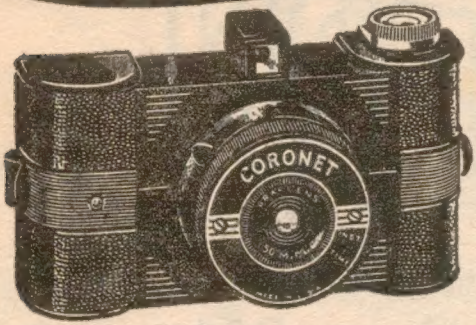

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THRILLING WESTERN

Vol. XXXV, No. 3 *EVERY STORY BRAND NEW* September, 1945

A Complete Texas Ranger Novelet

When Outlaws Ride

By BRADFORD SCOTT

The fighting hombre known as El Halcon goes into fast action with roaring guns when a bloody reign of terror visits Brewer County, along the Rio Grande, and leaves a trail of tragedy in its wake!.....11

Two Other Exciting Novelets

BRUSH POPPERS . . . . . Johnston McCulley 32
Ranger "Gunflash" Marken proves his right to his nickname when he forces a powder-smoke showdown with a passel of desperate range polecats!

PUNCHERS CAN'T WIN . . . . . Syl MacDowell 42
When Swap and Whopper figure a way to beat the shortage of beeswax, they pop into a sweet mess of trouble and pretty near everybody gets stung!

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TO MAKE A MAN MAD . . . . . Samuel Mines 29
The Claus brothers brace timid Rabbit at the wrong time

THERE'S GOLD IN THEM THAR HOSSES . . . Giles A. Lutz 53
Sandy Rhodes races smack into a rip-snorting Colt fandango

SHADOW OF BILLY THE KID . . . . . Barry Scobee 61
Tagged as an outlaw, Eeger Anson, fights to clear his name

BURIED GLORY . . . . . Cordwell Staples 65
A button grows up to wreak strange retribution in a showdown

Special Features

THE HITCHING RAIL . . . . . Buck Benson 6
A chatty department where range riders get together

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Five questions tuh test yore rangeland savvy

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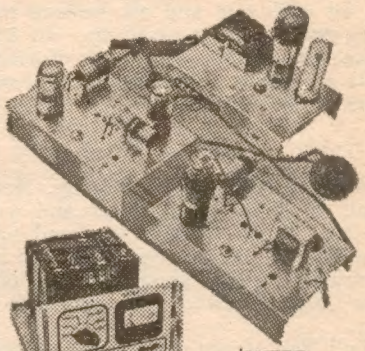

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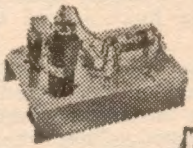

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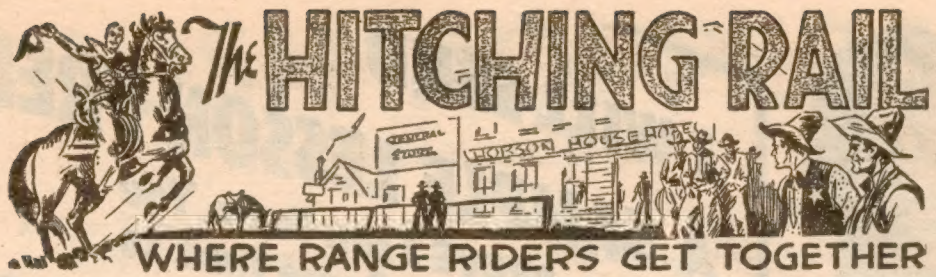


HOLA, ever'body! Sure makes this old heart o' mine start gallopin' 'round inside my chest to see so many of you lopin' up beside the old Hitchin' Rail and yellin' "howdy" to one and all.

Every mail's a-bringin' in letters from fellahs and gals in all parts o' the country, askin' a thousand interestin' questions, seems like, about people and places o' the west. Sure is a pleasure to squat down and chew the fat with one and all, believe me!

So, come close around the old hitch rail, make yourselves plumb comfortable, and we'll get down to the business o' answerin' some o' these inquiries.

Saddle Savvy

Mason Cummings o' Albany, New York, wants to know about kinds and weights o' saddles. Mason expects to spend some time on a Nevada cattle ranch soon, and his Dad's promised him a cowboy outfit complete with chaps, and a brand new saddle to call his own.

Well, Son, if you're goin' on a ranch in any western state the kind of saddle you'll want will be the cowboy type. No other kind will do on a cattle ranch, 'cause that's what ever'body else will be ridin'.

Mind you, I'm not sayin' the cowboy saddle is best for all places and conditions, folks. Some people swears by the "flat" or English saddle, and can't see any other kind. That sort o' saddle is mostly used for park riding, and for fox hunting and the like, though.

Then there's folks what'll use nothin' but the McClellan type—the kind used by the U. S. Cavalry. The McClellan weighs about thirty pounds stripped. Then there's the jockey saddle that's like a postage stamp on a horse's back. It's used mainly for racin', of course.

But you'll want a cowboy saddle, Mason. It weighs about forty pounds, and has a horn and a high cantle. The horn is for the purpose o' assistin' the cowboy with his rope; he wraps it around the horn and has it ready to his hand for use. But if you get in trouble on yore horse, Son, why grab that old horn and hang on for dear life and save yore neck.

Grabbin' the horn when yo're in trouble is what's called "Pullin' leather," or "Grabbin' leather," but if you haven't learned jest all there is to learn about ridin' yet, why, grab leather and hold fast.

That, folks, is one o' the reasons for havin' a horn on the saddle, and a durned good one, if you asks me!

A good cowboy saddle will cost from forty dollars up, and it's mostly "up," and if you can get it! A good saddle oughta last a life time, with proper care, though, and it can be packed complete with bed-blanket, grub, ammunition and tobacco and such.

Any of you fellahs and gals ownin' a bronc sure ought to look after his shoein' and take good care of his feet. The cowboy has got a sayin' that the hoss is only jest as good as his legs, and that ain't no joke.

No use havin' yore saddle, bridle and bit kept oiled and in good shape unless yo're gonna take plumb good care of his shoein'. Neglectin' the care o' yore bronc's feet is like a fellah what does a good paint job on his automobile and keeps her filled with gas, but plumb forgets to put tires on his wheels.

She won't run worth a cent without her underpinnin' is right—horse or car, no, suh!

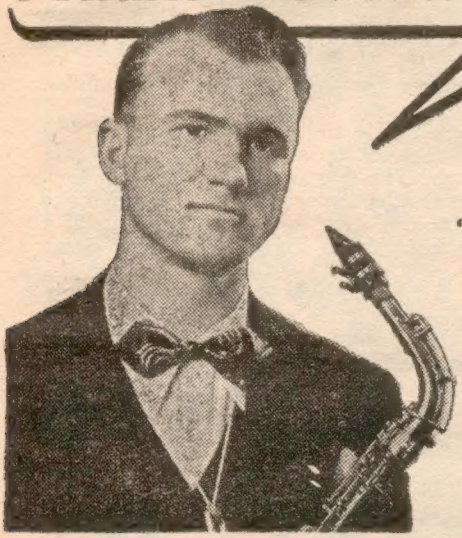
Shoein' is Important

There's sure a heap to learn about shoein' horses, and don't you forget it. Western folks uses steel calks on both toe and heels, both summer and winter, mostly. Though some folks leaves off the toe calks and uses jest heel calks in summer.

What's a calk? It's jest a small piece o' steel welded ontuh the horseshoe by a black-

(Continued on page 8)

Three months after beginning your lessons I STARTED PLAYING IN A DANCE ORCHESTRA



"NOW I HAVE AN ORCHESTRA OF MY OWN"

writes Bert Magyar of Barnwell, Alberta, Canada

"IT HAS been a pleasure studying my lessons and I am well pleased with your Course. Three months from the time I began taking your lessons I started playing with a dance orchestra, and at the present time I have an orchestra of my own.

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"Thanking you for helping me obtain this wonderful Course, I remain"

(Signed) Bert Magyar

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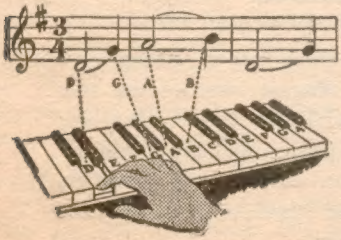

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The ROSICRUCIANS

San Jose (AMORC) California

THE HITCHING RAIL

(Continued from page 6)

smith. A calk is about a half inch high, or a little higher.

The heel calks are usually made by heatin' the shoe and then turnin' the ends downward, but the toe calk has to be welded ontuh the shoe. That weldin' takes a good blacksmith what knows his job, or the calk'll fall off.

Shoein' correct is mighty important, folks. It's important to leave the calks off o' shoes ever now and then if they holds the frog of the foot up so's it don't ever touch the earth. The frog, as you probably know, is that resilient piece o' flesh what looks like a piece o' hard sole on the bottom of a horse's foot. If you lift the foot you can see it easy.

Now that frog needs exercise same as any other live part o' the anatomy, and if it can't touch the ground it can't get friction and exercise. After a while it begins to get hard and dry without life or expansion in it, and without blood pressure it'll wither. This will cause the foot to become deformed and cow men call that "contracted hoof."

Barefoot Horses

Some outfits lets their horses go barefoot. It's a funny thing, but with some horses that'll work jest fine, while others will ruin their feet pronto without shoes.

Shoes pays in rough, rocky country, nearly every time, though in sandy country, while the sands act almost like a file, a bronc can go barefoot and his hoofs will become hard as steel in time. On the Arabian Desert where they raise them beautiful Arabian horses they seldom shoe, but their horses' feet are small, healthy, and the hoofs as hard as flint. I reckon that shows nature intended horses to go without shoes.

Trust yore horse shoein' to the blacksmith on the ranch, Mason, and watch and listen and learn a lot. He knows horses, and he knows the terrain of that particular country, and he can tell by lookin' at yore animal's hoofs jest the sort o' shoes he needs. Yes, suh, he's the doctor, and can sure teach you a lot.

Now then, enough about horses' hoofs for the time bein', I reckon.

(Continued on page 75)

Just out—the August issue of the new pocket-size MYSTERY BOOK Magazine featuring the newest mystery novel by Hugh Pentecost, also Cornell Woolrich, Will Cuppy and others. Get it today, 25c at all newsstands. *(Adv.)*

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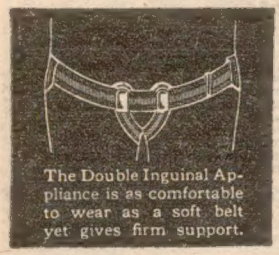

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There was the crash of a shot and the horseman reeled, blood streaming from his hand

WHEN OUTLAWS RIDE

By BRADFORD SCOTT

The fighting hombre known as El Halcon goes into fast action with roaring guns when a bloody reign of terror visits Brewer County, along the Rio Grande, and leaves a trail of tragedy in its wake!

CHAPTER I

On the Run

SHERIFF Tom Mathers sat in his office talking with his chief deputy, Dave Carston. Mathers was a big, bulky man with a good-humored smile, and was generally liked. Carston was lean, nervous, cantankerous, but had the reputation of being a first-class peace officer.

Carston suddenly cocked his head sideward in an intent listening attitude. "Somebody headed this way, and comin' fast," he remarked.

Mathers nodded, and continued to stuff tobacco into his old black pipe. He glanced inquiringly over the bowl of the pipe as the door was flung open and a man dashed in, breathing hard, his eyes wild with apprehension.

"Sheriff!" he gulped. "The Harlow brothers and their hands are in the Ace-Full Saloon, drunk and raisin' a ruckus! Yuh'd

A COMPLETE TEXAS RANGER NOVELET

better hightail down there before a killin' comes off."

With a disgusted snort, Sheriff Mathers fished his gun-belt from a drawer and buckled it on. Dave Carston, who removed his gun only when he removed his pants, did not have to reach for his belt. He merely stood up, stretching his long arms and yawning.

"All right," grunted the sheriff. "Let's go, Dave."

When they reached the Ace-Full, they found it a bedlam. Tables were overturned, chairs smashed. A man with his head split open lay on the floor. A bartender, a dazed look in his eyes, sagged against the back bar and mopped shakily at his bloody face with a towel.

At the far end of the bar, in a tight group, stood the Harlow brothers, Sime and Wesley, and five of their hands.

"All right, yuh hellions!" he called to the Harlows. "Yuh're goin' to the calaboose."

For an instant there was silence. Then the room seemed to fairly explode with the roar of six-shooters.

Sheriff Mathers staggered back, vainly trying to draw his gun. Carston's hand flashed down and up.

"Look out for Dave Carston, Sime!" Wesley Harlow yelled.

Just as Carston pulled trigger, Sime Harlow turned sideward to him. The cool action in the thick of the furious tumult of battle was characteristic of the iron-nerved Harlow. Carston's bullet fanned his face instead of drilling him dead center.

Throwing open his coat Sime Harlow seized a sawed-off shotgun hanging in a loop to his right shoulder, tipped it up and fired both barrels at Carston.

The heavy double charge of buckshot lifted Carston clean off his feet and crashed him to the floor in a limp huddle. Sime Harlow let his shotgun swing back on its shoulder band beneath his coat, snapped his Colt from its holster and fired twice at the staggering sheriff.

TEN seconds after he had entered the saloon, ten seconds of the smoke of blazing guns, packed with murderous hatred and flaming death, Sheriff Mathers reeled out onto the street and sank to the ground, both arms broken, his body shot through and through, with only minutes to live.

Stepping over the body of Deputy Dave Carston, who lay with his face buried in the sawdust, the Harlows left the saloon with drawn guns. Nobody tried to stop them.

Nobody tried to stop them when they mounted their horses and clattered out of town and were lost in the darkness of a moonless night.

As they raced across the star-burned prairie, young Wesley drew up alongside his towering, broad-shouldered brother.

"Sime," he said, "we killed a sheriff and his deputy. We're on the run now."

Sime Harlow's black eyes flashed. "Well, what of it?" he growled.

"Sime," Wesley persisted, "we'll need money, and we ain't got none."

"All right," the elder Harlow replied, "we'll get some."

"How?"

"You foller me and stop askin' fool questions and yuh'll see. I've had somethin' in mind for quite a spell now. Reckon it's about time to pull it off. Close yore trap and ride."

For another mile they rode in silence, the Harlows in the lead, the five Rocking H cowboys herding close behind.

Sime Harlow abruptly slowed the pace. A moment later he turned into a rutted track that branched from the main trail.

"Up here a quarter of a mile is the Preston stone quarry," he said. "They got somethin' up there we'll need. Foller my lead, now, and keep yore eyes pealed."

The shadow cutting of the quarry hove into view. The buildings were dark, but a single light burned in a little shanty set off to one side.

Outside the shanty Sime Harlow dismounted. He strode to the door, his men close behind him, and flung it open.

Inside the shanty, the lone watchman on the job leaped to his feet as the Harlows crowded through the door, hats drawn low over their glinting eyes.

"What you fellers want?" demanded the watchman, and half-turned to a rifle that leaned against the wall nearby.

Sime Harlow's answer was to lace two bullets through the watchman's heart.

"Get his keys, and pack his lantern along, too," he told young Wesley.

Leaving the shanty he led the way to a small building set at some distance from the other structures. It was painted a flaming red and plastered with signs reading "Danger."

Sime Harlow found the right key and fitted it into the lock. He threw open the door, took the lantern and, holding it in front of him, gingerly stepped into the powder house.

"A dozen sticks oughta be plenty," he said, indicating the boxes of greasy-looking dynamite cylinders. "Take a coil of fuse and some caps. Careful how yuh handle that stuff. If it goes off we'll have a long drop to take before we land. Okay, let's get out of here. Wrap that powder in yore coat, Wes, and be easy with it. Barnes," he directed one of the cowboys, "you pack the lantern. We may want it. Let's go. We ain't got no time to waste."

They left the quarry and followed the track back to the main trail. Along this they rode swiftly for half an hour, then Sime Harlow turned sharply to the south and rode across the prairie until the twin steel ribbons of the C & P Railroad glimmered in the starlight.

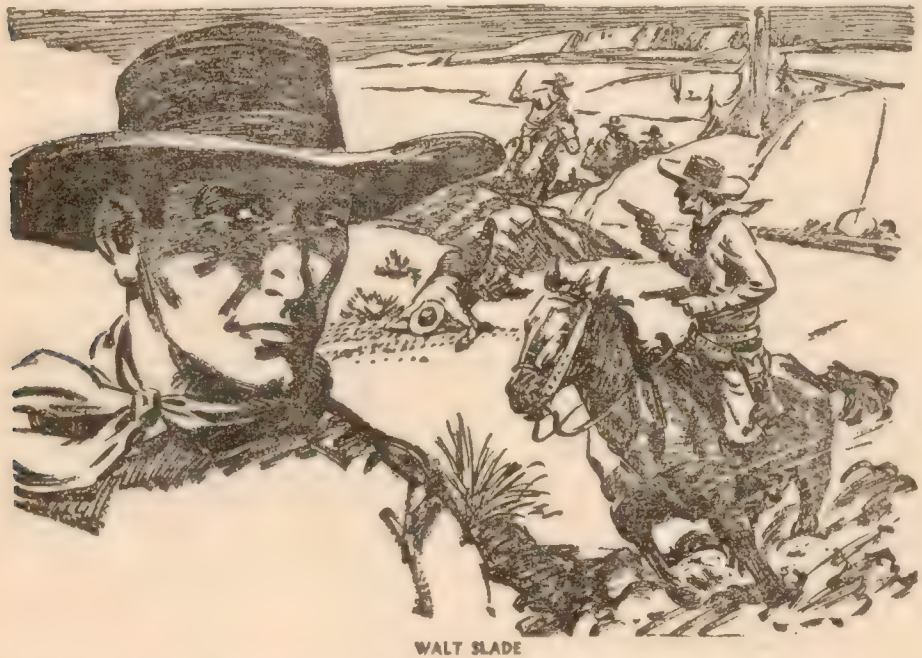
Along the line of the railroad he led his men, until he drew rein beside a short trestle that spanned a wash. The outlaws dismounted. Sime Harlow eased down the bank of the wash until he could reach where the girders that held the rails rested on the stonework of the pier.

"Pass down that dynamite," he told Wesley. "Hang onto a couple of sticks. We may need 'em for somethin' else."

He capped a fuse, crimped it to one of the dynamite sticks and tied the sticks together with a torn handkerchief.

"All right," he said, squatting on the bank and rolling a cigarette. "You fellers lead the hosses back into the brush and hole up there. Get far enough back so's yuh won't get blowed to Kingdom Come when this stuff let's go."

"Yuh got that fuse cut awful short, Sime," said young Wesley, peering by the uncertain light of the watchman's lantern.



WALT SLADE

"You tend to yore own knittin'," his brother snarled at him. "Get into the brush with them hosses. I know what I'm doin'."

Squatting silently on the bank, the giant outlaw watched until he saw the gleam of an approaching headlight round a curve a mile distant. With narrowed eyes he watched it draw nearer, calculating the speed of its approach. With a steady hand he held the glowing end of his lighted cigarette to the fuse.

The Chevalier, one of the C & P's crack transcontinental passenger trains, was late and making up time. In the cab, the old engineer sat with one hand on the throttle bar, the other toying with the handle of his airbrake valve. His glance along the track

ahead was perfunctory, for here the steel ran over the level prairie, arrow-straight for several miles, with no danger of slides or falling rocks.

HE GLANCED at his watch, frowned, and widened the throttle a trifle. The stack of the great locomotive chuckled a quicker song. The spinning drivers hummed against the rails, their monotonous grind punctuated by the clang and clatter of the flashing side rods.

A red glare filled the cab as the fireman flung open the fire door and bailed "black diamonds" into the roaring inferno of the firebox. A "squirrel tail" of steam rose lazily from the safety valve. The needle of the steam gauge wavered against the two hundred-mark. Black smoke belched from the purring stack. The door clanged shut and the fireman hopped back to his seatbox and leaned out the window, blinking his eyes to free them from the glare of the fire.

Ahead, a line of black shadow split the prairie. It was a deep and narrow wash. The steel cut the gloom of the wash with straight ribbons that shimmered like silver in the beam of the headlight. The trestle was but a few hundred yards ahead of the speeding train when from the black gulf of the wash torrented a sheet of yellow flame. A crashing thunder drowned the clang of steel on steel and the rumbling roar of the heavy train. The gleaming ribbons of track vanished into nothingness in a cloud of smoke.

The engineer tried to save his train, but he didn't have a chance. He slammed the throttle shut, "wiped the gauge" with his air-brake handle.

But even as the air screeched from the cylinders and the shoes ground against the tires, the engine struck the twisted rails and bent girders that had spanned the wash. With a shattering roar it plunged into the depths. The baggage car followed it, piling end-on on top of it. The express car slammed into the up-ended baggage car, bounced, rocked, left the rails and plowed deep into the soft soil, coming to a halt with one end overhanging the wash. Half the coaches behind were derailed, the remainer jammed and battered.

From the dark gulf which was the grave of the engineer, the fireman and the baggage master, arose a bellow of escaping steam. Through it knifed the screams of injured and terrified passengers.

The doors of the express car were wrenched wide open and jammed in their slots by the terrific impact. Toward the open door, next them, guns out and ready, rushed the Harlow outfit.

Flame spurted from the express car. One of the outlaws cursed as a bullet seared his shoulder. The others dropped to the ground and sought cover.

"I'll fix the skunks!" growled Sime Harlow, and puffed hard on his still lighted cigarette.

Something soared into the air from where he lay, something that left a trail of sparks behind it. It vanished through the open door of the express car.

Again there was a crashing explosion. Smoke boiled from the open door. The outlaws waited a moment for the smoke to clear, then cautiously got to their feet. No shots greeted them from the door.

"Fan out, yuh hellions, and shoot anybody that tries to come over this way from the train," Sime Harlow ordered his men. "Come on, Wes!"

A single light that had not been extinguished by the explosion showed one messenger lying dead on the floor. The second, his face bloody, sagged against the wall.

Sime Harlow clambered into the car and shook him roughly.

"All right," he growled, "open that safe."

"G-go to thunder!" gasped the messenger.

Without wasting a word in argument, Harlow shot him through the left arm.

"Now open it, while yuh can still use the other hand," he told the moaning man.

The messenger quailed beneath the outlaw's terrible glare. He staggered to the tall steel safe in one end of the car and twirled the combination knob with trembling fingers.

Outside sounded a shot, echoed by a scream of pain. Harlow did not even turn around. He watched the messenger twirl the knob until the tumblers clicked into place. Then he roughly shoved the man aside, seized the knob and swung the safe door open. He passed bags of clinking gold pieces to Wesley.

"Dump 'em out the door and whoop to some of the boys to come get 'em." he told his brother.

Five minutes later the outlaws sped away from the wrecked train with their loot.

And thus began the Harlow reign of terror in Brewer County.

CHAPTER II

Chuck Line Rider

SWEATING and steaming under the blazing Texas sun, the Tree L trail herd rolled northward toward the shipping town of Martin. Old Lafe Sanderson, owner of the Tree L, rode with a watchful eye on his big herd and for the surrounding country.

"We'll make it to Talkin' Water canyon to bed down for the night,"

The hills rocked to the roar of gunfire as the outlaws went into action

he told his foreman. "Then we'll get an early start in the mornin' and shove 'em on to town by noon."

"Yeah, Talkin' Water canyon is a safe place," agreed Clate Gray, the foreman. "And yuh can't be too safe nowadays, with the Harlows and them sort of sidewinders swallerforkin' all over the country."

"Somethin's got to be done about them Harlows," growled Sanderson. "Sheriff Bulkley has about as much chance with that outfit as a wax dog chasin' a firebrick cat through the hot place. Shove 'em along, Clate. It's gettin' late."

Far in the rear of the herd, "Dishonest Abe" Strealey, the cook, rocked on the high seat of his lumbering chuckwagon. He put on the brakes as the big "groanin'" cart lurched down a grade to where, at the bottom of the hollow, a much narrower trail wound out of the brush and cut across the main track. It had rained the day before and the bottom of the hollow was muddy.

The wagon made it down the sag all right and started across the level. Without warning a rear wheel sank deep into a hole and stuck.

The wagon brought up short, the broncs snorting, the driver cursing.

Dishonest Abe spoke to his horses in no uncertain terms, telling them to "get up and get this mess out of here!"

The horses were willing, but despite their most strenuous efforts, the wagon stayed where it was, the sunken rear wheel slipping and sliding against the steep side of the hole.

Old Abe got down stiffly from his high perch. From the "coonie," the sagging sheet of rawhide stretched and lashed to the running gear of the wagon, and used to carry firewood, he took a slab which he shoved under the wheel as far as he could. Then he whooped to his horses, who again did their best, to no avail. Abe tried to shove the slab under the tire so it would provide a purchase for the turning wheel, but his strength was not equal to the task. The horses surged against the traces, the wagon creaked and groaned, and stayed right where it was.

The old cook wiped his streaming brow, sat down on a boulder by the side of the trail, and talked to the offending wagon wheel. His expressions were rare and salty. He talked for five minutes, and did not repeat himself. He paused with his mouth hanging open, a particularly choice objurgation bit in two.

Behind him had sounded a musical crash of guitar chords. As he turned a voice spoke.

"Sounds better set to music, don't yuh figger?"

Old Abe gawked at the speaker, who had ridden out of the brush unheard on the soft earth of the side trail.

He was a tall man, much over six feet, wide of shoulder, lean of waist and hip. He had a lean, bronzed face with a high-bridged nose, a rather wide mouth, grin-quirked at the corners, a jutting chin and long, level gray eyes in the depths of which seemed to lurk a dancing devil of laughter. The hair that showed beneath his pushed-back "J. B." was thick and crisp, and so black a blue shadow seemed to lie upon it.

He wore regulation range garb of overalls, batwing chaps, soft blue shirt, vivid handkerchief looped carelessly about his sinewy throat, and well-scuffed, high-heeled boots of softly tanned leather. Encircling his waist were double cartridge belts, and from the carefully worked and oiled hand-made holsters suspended from the belts protruded the black butts of heavy guns. He forked a magnificent black horse and across the saddle-horn he held a small guitar, his slender, bronzed fingers lightly caressing the strings.

"Yeah, mebbe if yuh used music on her, she'd roll," he chuckled. "Like this!"

He threw back his black head, the guitar crashed a chord and a deep, rich voice pealed forth:

Roll along, wagon-wheel, roll along,
Take me back home where I belong;
Biscuits in the oven, beans in the pot,
Bacon in the fryin' pan, coffee steamin' hot.

Old Abe glowered at him.

"Think yuh're smart, don't yuh!" he grunted disgustedly. "Yuh wouldn't feel so peart if yuh had twenty hungry cowhands waitin' for supper, and supper goin' to be late."

The tall stranger chuckled at the irate old-timer. He slipped a waterproof case over the guitar, and hung the instrument to the saddle-horn by a silken thong. Then he swung lightly to the ground and inspected the offending wheel.

"I figger we can get her out," he announced cheerfully.

He uncoiled his rope, noosed the end of the wagon tongue and tied hard and fast to his saddle.

"Okay, Shadow, tighten 'er up," he told the black horse, who obediently moved ahead on the trail until the sagging rope was taut.

HE STEPPED back and again surveyed the sunken wheel.

"Be ready to shove the chunk under when I lift her," he told the cook.

"What yuh gabbin' about!" scoffed old Abe. "Two men couldn't lift that wheel out of that rut."

"Reckon they couldn't," the other agreed cheerfully. "They'd be gettin' in each other's

way. Let's go, now."

He gripped the hub of the wheel with both sinewy hands. Old Abe saw the seams of his well-worn shirt stretch to the bursting point as great muscles leaped out on arms and shoulders. Before the cook's astounded eyes, the ponderous wheel rose out of the rut until it was level with the surface of the trail. Mechanically he shoved the slab under it. The stranger eased the wheel down until the tire was resting on the slab. He stepped back and straightened up, dusting his hands off.

"Give yore hosses their powders, now," he directed.

Old Abe whooped to his broncs. The stranger's voice rang out also:

"Trail, Shadow!"

The black lunged forward in unison with the wagon horses. The taut rope hummed like a harp string. The wagon moved ahead, reached solid ground.

"Hold it, Shadow!" the tall man called.

"Reckon that did it," he observed, as he walked toward the wagon tongue to loosen his twine. Old Abe trudged beside him, regarding him with awed eyes.

Abruptly the stranger halted, staring across the slackened rope.

Unobserved, three men had ridden across the open prairie to the left. At the far edge of the trail they sat their horses, interestedly observing operations.

One a little in advance of his companions was tall and lanky, with abnormally long arms and wide shoulders. He had a youthful face that was already deeply lined with the marks of dissipation. He had wild, reckless eyes set deep in cavernous sockets. At the moment those eyes were resting avidly on the magnificent black horse.

Old Abe gulped in his throat as his glance ran over the man's face. He nervously wet his suddenly dry lips with the tip of a nervous tongue.

The horseman turned his hot gaze back to the tall stranger.

"Cowboy," he said, in a harsh, growling voice. "I sort of fancy that black hoss. S'pose yuh get the rig off him. You and me are goin' to make a little swap."

As he spoke, he flashed a gun from holster.

Old Abe could never explain satisfactorily, even to himself, just what happened then, or how. There was a flicker of lean, sinewy hands, the crash of a shot and the horseman reeled in his saddle with a yelp of pain, blood streaming from his right hand. His gun, its lock smashed and battered, lay in the dust a dozen feet distant.

His companions streaked for their guns, then froze with them still leathered. They were looking into two unwavering black muzzles, one of them still wisping smoke, that yawned at them hungrily. And behind those rock-steady muzzles were two terrible cold eyes from which all the laughter had vanished.

"Never see such eyes," old Abe told it later. "They was the color of polished steel on a cold mornin', and back in 'em were little crawling flickers like fire under ice. Give me the creeps up and down my backbone to look at 'em."

The stranger spoke now, and his voice was no longer musically drawling. It was hard, brittle, like ice grinding under an iron tire.

"Don't reach for the other one," he warned the wounded man. "I might miss my next shot, and when I miss it's always inside a gent's gun hand."

The horseman understood even if he did not appreciate the grim jest. Neither he nor his companions labored under any delusion as to where that next bullet would strike when it "missed." He gasped, glared, his eyes watering with rage, his face drawn and contorted until it was like to a grotesque death mask. Twice he tried to speak, but the words seemed to choke in his throat. Finally he got them out, thick with menace.

"This—this ain't the last of it! I'll be seein' yuh again, cuss yuh!"

"Look good the first time, and look quick," the tall cowboy replied imperturbably. "Yuh might not have time to look twice. All right, now—turn them cayuses and hightail back the way yuh come. Get goin'!"

The last words shot out like bullets and the unsavory trio winced under their impact. Speechless, but with black glares of hatred, they turned their horses.

The tall, black-haired man holstered one gun and walked to his horse, his eyes never leaving them. He slid a heavy Winchester from where it snugged in the saddle-boot and cradled it in his arms.

"This saddle gun is a couple inches longer in the barrel than the ones yuh're packin'," he remarked pointedly, "so don't make no mistakes. I've got the range on yuh."

There was no answer to the warning. Cruelly spurring their horses, the three rode off at a gallop. The tall man holstered his second Colt and watched them until they vanished over a distant ridge.

OLD Abe was regarding him with frightened eyes.

"Son," he said, his voice a trifle unsteady, "fork that black hoss of yores and hightail out of this section as fast as he can pack yuh. That was Wesley Harlow yuh winged."

"That so?" the other replied. "And just who is Wesley Harlow?"

Strealey stared.

"Yuh ain't from this section, eh?" he observed.

"Nope," the other replied. "Rode over here from the west."

"Wes Harlow is Sime Harlow's kid brother," old Abe said. "The Harlows and their gang are the saltiest pack of sidewinders this section ever coughed up. They're plumb bad and they don't forget. They'll be on yore tail for this day's work, son. You trail out of here—fast."

The cowboy shook his head.

"Nope, reckon not," he replied. "My hoss is sort of fagged and don't feel up to skalleyhootin' right now."

Strealey glanced at the black horse, who was bright of eye, his coat satiny, his pose bespeaking boundless energy held in leash with difficulty.

"Yeah, so I notice," the cook remarked dryly. "Son, yuh're a plumb fool, but I sort of cotton to yore kind of fool. My name's Strealey. Abe Strealey. Old Abe Strealey. I was named for 'Honest Abe' Lincoln, but folks with notions of bein' funny kind of changed it to Dishonest Abe, and I've got used to it after packin' it for sixty years."

The other chuckled, and held out his hand.

"Mine's Slade," he returned. "Front handle's got whittled down to Walt. Glad to know yuh, Abe. And now," he added after they shook hands, "s'pose we get this shebang movin' before them hungry punchers of yores plumb swell up and bust from too much wind puddin'."

CHAPTER III

Death in the Night

THE story of what happened at the trail forks lost nothing in Abe Strealey's telling of it when they reached where the Tree L outfit had bedded down the trail herd. Grizzled Old Man Sanderson shook hands solemnly with Walt Slade.

"But what Abe handed out was good advice," he agreed. "Getting the Harlows down on yuh is bad business, son." He added, "But if yuh're in the notion of hangin' around a spell, I can use another tophand."

"Might as well give it a whirl, I reckon," Slade replied. "My twine is sort of runnin' loose right at the minute."

The Tree L hands had chosen the mouth of a narrow box canyon for the bedding ground. To the west the canyon wall was sheer, a beetling rampart of stone towering hundreds of feet into the air. To the east it was a slope so steep and rocky as to be practically unclimbable. This slope, after slanting upward for a couple of hundred yards, ended in a wide bench that jutted against the east wall of the canyon. The bench formed the bed of a sizable stream that ran out of the canyon and tumbled over the ragged south end of the bench in a series of falls before it reached the prairie and flowed swiftly south by east to join the Rio Grande, which was not far distant.

"She runs out of a hole in the box end wall of the gulch," Lafe Sanderson told Slade, jerking his head toward the tumbling water. "This is a prime spot to bed a herd, with times like they are. They can't nobody come down the canyon, or down the side walls, either. And we can keep a eye on the mouth. Which is somethin', with outfits like the Harlows runnin' loose. I ain't scared, so long as they can't get the jump on me. Got twenty hands, and they're loaded for bear. About twice as many as I'd need to trail a herd of this size under ordinary conditions."

Slade had already noticed the unusual size of the outfit, one cowboy to every two hundred cattle or so being the normal ratio. In this instance it was doubled.

"Folks must be sort of jumpy hereabouts, all right," he mused, as he attended to Shadow's wants.

The canyon was well grass-grown and the tired beefs contentedly cropped and munched while the hungry punchers did ample justice to Dishonest Abe's offerings. The Tree L hands had pitched their camp near the mouth of the canyon and at some little distance from the boulder-strewn slope.

The canyon was so narrow and the cliffs that hemmed it in so high that the beetling west wall seemed to overhang the site of the camp. A little stretch of rocky, broken ground protected the camp from the possibility of a sudden stampede by the cattle. If such an unexpected happening did occur, the herd would be forced to circle the camp on their way out of the gorge.

Not that Sanderson feared or anticipated such an occurrence. But he posted more than the usual number of night hawks to ride herd on the beefs during the hours of darkness.

After filling themselves as full as possible with food and steaming coffee, the tired waddies spread their blankets and turned in. Soon the camp was quiet, save for the contented rumbling of the full-fed and sleepy cattle, and the song, or what passed for it, of the night hawks slowly riding their monotonous rounds. An occasional mutter of distant thunder drifted from the west, but the sky was not heavily overcast and the chance of rain appeared slight.

But if there was peace in the Tree L trail camp, there was far from it in the abandoned prospector's cabin some miles to the west and south, which the Harlow gang was using for a temporary hangout.

Wesley Harlow, his bullet-furrowed hand in a bandage, strode about muttering curses, his eyes glaring with maniacal fury. The giant Sime slumped in a chair before the fire, his long legs stretched out, puffing at his pipe, apparently deep in thought and paying little mind to Wesley's tantrums.

Suddenly, however, he whirled in his chair to glower at his brother.

"Shut up," he told him harshly. "Reckon yuh got what was comin' to yuh. Some day yuh'll get us all into trouble with yore stunts. Yuh got a good hoss. What'd yuh want to try and do a plumb stranger out of his for? Some time, if yuh ever get anythin' but hair under yore hat, yuh'll learn to find out somethin' about strangers 'fore yuh jump 'em. Yuh're just like fools who have been knowed to pick up black diamond rattlers thinkin' they was bull snakes, and not takin' the trouble to find out for shore. By the way, what did that jigger that made yuh look like a snail climbin' a slick log look like?"

One of the men who had accompanied Wes Harlow answered the question.

"Big, tall, wide-shouldered jigger, a heap over six feet," he said. "Black hair, gray eyes that seemed to go through yuh like a greased bullet. Sort of a hawk nose. Packed two guns. Uh-huh, and I rec'lect he packed a guitar in a case. Had it hangin' on his saddle-horn. Funny thing for a chuck-line-ridin' cowboy to be packin'."

Sime Harlow jumped as if a tarantula had bitten him.

"What's that?" he barked. "Yuh say he was ridin' a black hoss and packin' a guitar? Big and tall, and ice-eyed?"

"That's right," his informant replied wonderingly.

"And," added Harlow with deadly quiet, "he didn't happen to be singin' when yuh rode up?"

"How'd yuh know that, Sime?" the other man asked wonderingly. "That's how we come to turn that way. Heard somebody singin' and went to see who it was. We was too far off when we heard it to get the words, but I ain't never heard singin' like that before. A feller what can sing like that jigger hadn't ought to need a gun. I b'lieve if he'd sung to Wes, even *he* wouldn't have shot him."

SIME HARLOW turned and bent his black glare on his younger brother.

"Yeah, yuh picked up a black diamond, all right," he rasped. "Yuh ganglin' no-brained splinter! Do yuh know who that was?"

"I don't know, and I don't give a hoot!" bawled Wesley. "All I know is when I meet the sidewinder again I'll—"

"Die!" Sime Harlow cut in. "Yuh'd have about as much chance shadin' that sidewinder as a jackrabbit would have in a hound dog's mouth. The next time yuh see that hellion—see his back! Rode a black hoss, eh, and packed a guitar? 'The singin'est man in the whole Southwest!' That hellion was *El Halcon!*"

Wesley Harlow stopped swearing and stared at his brother, open-mouthed.

"El Halcon!" he repeated. "The jigger the Mexicans named The Hawk!"

"Uh-huh. Now yuh know what yuh was up against?"

"Yeah, and I feel better'n I did," young Harlow returned. "They say he's got a faster gun hand even than Buckskin Frank Leslie had, and he was one of the best the West has ever known!" He added with vicious emphasis, "And I'm takin' yore advice, Sime. The next time I'll see his back first."

"See that yuh do," grunted the elder outlaw, "or he's liable to be the last thing yuh ever do see."

"Say, who is this *El Halcon* jigger anyhow?" asked a squint-eyed cowboy who was new to Texas.

"He's the smartest and saltiest owlhoot this state has known since Sam Bass and John

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Wesley Hardin," Sime replied slowly. "The Law ain't never been able to get anythin' on him, and I reckon most sheriffs ain't too anxious to tangle with him. He's cashed in a lot of fellers, but they always happened to be fellers the Law was on the lookout for, too, so there never was much said about it. He sort of makes a specialty, so far as I can figger, of hornin' in on good things other fellers has started and skimmin' off the cream. He's plumb bad, but"—he added this grimly—"I've a notion he's liable to get his come-uppance this time, if he tangles his twine with our'n.

"Yuh say he rode off with the Tree L chuckwagon? Yeah? Well he's liable to be at their camp tonight. Hmmm! Mebbe this'll work out better'n expected. Is everythin' set up in that canyon, Barnes? They're shore to bed the herd there—all the drives headin' this way for Martin do. And I reckon it's about time we was ridin'. Gettin' past midnight. Let's go!"

At the Tree L camp all was quiet. Midnight came. The great clock in the sky wheeled westward. The cattle were resting easy. The drowsy night hawks found little to do. There was an occasional flicker of lightning in the west, and the intermittent mutter of thunder grew somewhat louder. Loud enough to be heard above the monotonous low rumble of the water tumbling down the end of the bench. Loud enough for *El Halcon's* keen ears to catch the sound.

It was toward the dead hour before the dawn that Walt Slade sat up in his blankets as a deeper mutter rolled up the overcast sky. He glanced keenly at the ragged veil of clouds, through the rents in which an occasional star peeped inquiringly.

"Looks like we might have a mite of rain, after all," he told himself. "Glad I put my guitar in the wagon out of the damp."

He glanced toward the western cliff wall, where he knew Shadow was holed up comfortably. His gaze swung back to the broken lip of the bench at the crest of the slope where, back of the rim-rock that walled it in, the deep and swift water worried along.

Over the lip of the rim-rock had flashed a sudden tiny glow of light.

Slade was puzzled. "That darn thunderstorm ain't that far up in the sky," he muttered. "Must have been the reflection of a flash from a mica outcroppin'."

He continued to gaze at the dark lip lifting against the darker loom of the cliffs beyond the bench, but the flicker of light was not repeated. He yawned, prepared to settle down in his blankets once more. Then he shot to his feet as if propelled by a giant spring, instinctively snatching up his removed gun-belts as he did.

From the lip of the rim-rock had burst a blinding glare of yellowish flame. Hard on the dazzling flash came a thudding boom.

As Slade stared in amazement, he was conscious that the crackling explosion was being echoed by a rumbling roar that swelled to a terrific tumult of sound. He blinked his eyes to clear them of the glare that had blinded him for the moment. As his vision reaccustomed itself to the dark that had rushed down almost instantly, he saw the pale vision that accompanied the thundering roar.

Down the rocky slope rushed an emerald wall topped by a froth of ghostly white, rolling boulders before it, engulfing them a moment later, racing at appalling speed toward the canyon floor.

Slade's voice pealed out in a yell that pierced the rushing thunder:

"Come out of it! Across to the west cliff. The dam's busted!"

Dazed, bewildered, the sleep-sodden cowboys were tumbling out of their blankets, shouting dismay and apprehension. Under Slade's bellowed urging, they reeled and stumbled across the canyon.

Before they were half-way to the west wall, the flood was upon them, sweeping them off their feet, rolling them over and over in waist-deep water as the diverted stream came roaring down the slope.

The bawling of the terrified cattle added to the tumult. The battering of their hoofs on the hard ground sounded above the bellow of the surging waters. Half-swimming, half-wading, they were swept to the mouth of the canyon, where the torrent spread over the prairie and shallowed.

CHAPTER IV

Fire and Stampede

BAWLING and wailing, horns clashing, hoofs beating a drum-roll of sound, the herd fled in mad stampede, the night hawks racing before them.

From beyond the canyon mouth came a wild yelling, and the crack of guns. Lead whined into the canyon, spatting against the rocks, ricocheting with shrill screams.

One of the wading, wallowing cowboys let out a queer choking grunt, and vanished under the swirling water. Another cursed with pain and pawed at his blood-streaming arm.

Walt Slade, sinewy legs wide apart, leaning back against the force of the water that coiled about his thighs, slid his guns from their holsters and sent a stream of hissing lead toward the canyon mouth.

A derisive yell answered the shots, then the beat of hoofs driving after the fleeing herd. A few moments later, three distinctly spaced shots sounded in the distance.

At the base of the western cliffs, beyond the swirl and eddy of the diverted waters, the Tree L punchers huddled together, soaked to the skin, bruised, battered and seething with rage.

"Everybody accounted for?" asked Old Man Sanderson, wringing the water from his beard.

"Curly Evans got it," replied a young waddy. "I saw him go down. He was drowned, even if the slug didn't do for him. Reckon everybody else is here except the night hawks, and they was in front of the stampede. Mebbe they made it in the clear."

"Mebbe," agreed Sanderson in a voice that carried no conviction to his hearers.

Walt Slade, recalling those three ominously spaced shots, felt not the slightest doubt that the three night hawks would not be seen again as living men.

"But what happened, anyhow?" somebody demanded. "How come the creek to be down here in the canyon?"

A moment of silence followed, then Walt Slade spoke in his deep, musical voice.

"They dynamited the rim-rock up there," he explained to his listeners. "Must have had it planted and all ready, figgerin' the herd would be bedded down here. One of 'em slipped up there and lit the fuse. The rest of the outfit was waitin' outside the canyon for the herd to stampede out."

Old Man Sanderson swore viciously.

"It was the Harlows," he declared. "Nobody but Sime Harlow would have been smart enough to figger that out. Well, they got away with the herd, and cashed in four good men, the chances are."

His voice muttered downcast agreement. Heads were lifted as Slade spoke again.

"They haven't got away with it yet," he said. "That herd will travel slow after a hard day yesterday and a short rest. They'll run their legs off before them wideloopers can get 'em under control, and will be plumb blowed. We can catch up with 'em if we look sharp."

"By glory, son, it's worth tryin'!" declared Sanderson. "What's the first move?"

"Round up the hosses—they won't have strayed far," Slade instantly replied. "It'll be daylight in another hour and we can get started. Abe," he told the cook, "yore wagon is still on its wheels. See if yuh can get a fire started and some steamin' coffee ready. That'll help after this wettin'."

"We're goin' to stay wet," a cowboy remarked in disgusted tones. "Now it's beginnin' to rain."

"Best thing that could happen," Slade assured him cheerfully. "Now they can't keep from leavin' a trail for us to foller, no matter where they go. Up and at it, now—round up the hosses and get the rigs on 'em. Lucky we put our saddles in the coonie last night."

The Tree L hands hastened to obey. Nobody seemed to think it worthy to remark that this latest addition to the outfit had usurped all the authority in sight. Even Old Man Sanderson himself, and Clate Gray, his foreman, didn't question Slade's orders, but got busy along with the rest.

Dawn broke gray and misty with big drops falling steadily. But Slade, with a glance at the sky, delivered his opinion that the rain would stop shortly after the sun came up.

The hands began to troop in with the horses. They were bedraggled and nervous, except Shadow, who had not moved from where he had been holed up close to the cliff, and regarded the unwonted activity with a mildly curious eye.

Dishonest Abe had managed to get a fire going and soon was dishing out welcome cups of hot coffee.

The body of "Curly" Evans had been found and lay decently covered with a blanket at the base of the cliffs. A little later, men who had gone to look for them brought in the bodies of the three night hawks, all of whom had been shot to death. With muttered oaths of vengeance they placed them beside that of Curly Evans.

As soon as the light had strengthened a bit, the Tree L punchers saddled up and took the trail of the widelooped herd.

WALT SLADE rode in the lead, his steady gray eyes missing no detail of the landscape. He seemed to have a premonition that the chase would be a long one, for he had retrieved his guitar from the chuckwagon and carried it looped across his broad shoulders in its waterproof case.

On the wet ground the trail left by the fleeing cattle was easy to follow. Not so easy, however, when a few miles further on, it veered more to the west and entered the mountainous terrain that flanked the gorge of the Rio Grande. Here the soil was stony and hard and had been little affected by the rain that was already letting up.

But Slade's keen eyes noted broken twigs, bent grass blades and overturned stones the others would have passed unnoticed.

"We're gainin' on the hellions," he told Sanderson, several hours later.

The trail veered directly south once more and entered a vast hollow between two high and steep slopes. Both slopes and the floor of the narrow valley were densely grown with manzanita and other chaparral.

The sun was shining brightly now and it was hot and still in the brush-grown depths.

The trail, evidently a track that had been used more than once before, wound and tortured through the bristle of thicket. It was so narrow that the herd had left plenty of evidence of its passing in the nature of broken branches and scuffed stems.

On and on the trail wound. Only two men could ride abreast, now. Slade and Sanderson took the lead, the others crowding close behind.

The concentration furrow was deep between Slade's black brows as the sides of the hollow drew closer together and the growth, if anything, increased in density. It was a sure sign that The Hawk was doing some hard thinking.

"Easy," he cautioned Sanderson. "We don't want to run into a drygulchin'. This is a plumb perfect section for one. We can't be over far behind the hellions now. Keep yore ears open for bellerin'. Them steers ought to be gettin' mighty tired by now and begin talkin' about it."

Closer and closer drew the bristling slopes. The depths of the gorge were gloomy and there was a deathly stillness in which the sounds of their passage rang loud on the ear.

Suddenly Slade held up his hand, reining Shadow in sharply at the same moment.

"Listen!" he said. "Wasn't that a steer bawled?"

The sound came again, thin with distance, the querulous protest of weary, hungry and disgusted cattle. Slade's hand tightened on the bridle.

Then suddenly he eased off again, leaned forward in his hull and peered intently at the ribbon of sky ahead. The clean blue was fouled with a murky haze that rose from the growth.

Slade sniffed sharply. An acrid tang stung his nostrils.

"Smoke!" he exclaimed. "Wood smoke!"

"Mebbe they've stopped to cook dinner," a young puncher hazarded.

"Cook dinner, huh!" The Hawk barked. "They've stopped to cook us, or I'm a heap mistook. Look at that smoke boil up. They've fired the brush to block us."

As a chorus of oaths arose from his followers, he whirled in his saddle to stare back the way they had come. His face set in bleak lines. His eyes were icily cold.

"And they've fired it back of us, too," he said, gesturing toward the smoke that was rolling up against the northern sky. "Gents, we're trapped!"

An excited chorus arose as the Tree L punchers realized the full truth of Slade's statement. Bronzed faces lost their color, eyes stared wildly. For a moment there was near panic.

"Hold it!" The Hawk's cool voice cut at them. "Hold it! We ain't done in yet."

The words had a steadying effect.

Slade eyed the slope on the left. It was fairly gradual, less brush-grown than that on the right, which was rugged and precipitous and strewn with loose boulders.

"We can get up there to the left, mebbe before the fire cuts us off!" exclaimed Sanderson.

His men were already turning their horses to the left when *El Halcon* blared a warning.

"Not that way! That's the way the hellions will figger us to take. Ride up that sag and we'll be mowed down like jack-rabbits at a barbecue."

"But good gosh, Slade, we can't ride up that sag, to the right!" wailed Clate Gray, the foreman.

A chorus of dismayed agreement echoed his words.

"We've got to, and got to do it fast," Slade replied grimly. "That is, unless yuh figger to be able to stand as much heat now as yuh'll have to in the hereafter. If we stay here, we'll be roasted like pigs. The fire is comin' at us from both directions, and it's eatin' its way up the slopes, too. Look how them smoke clouds are widenin' out. Let's go!"

CURSING and muttering, the Tree L punchers sent their nervous horses at the sag. Staggering, scrambling, floundering over boulders, crashing through thorny growth that tore the clothes and scratched the faces of their riders and impeded their progress, they snorted up the slope that grew steeper and steeper. Before they were halfway to the rim-rock, the cowboys were forced to dismount and toil on on foot, dragging the frantic animals after them.

And ever closer rolled those thickening clouds of smoke. The air was hot, pungent with the smell of burning wood and scorching foliage, murky with flying ash. The sun overhead was obscured by a yellowish haze through which it glared like a jaundiced eye.

Walt Slade did not lead the van now. With Lafe Sanderson he brought up the rear, herding the stragglers ahead of him, urging the weaker to greater efforts.

Half-way up the slope the retarding growth thinned somewhat and they slipped and slid over naked rock that bruised hands and knees and sapped their remaining strength.

Something yelled through the air over their heads, smacked against a stone and whined off at a tangent. Above the ominous crackling of the burning brush sounded a distant but sharper crack.

Walt Slade wheeled in his tracks, sliding his Winchester from the saddle-boot as again came that lethal whine overhead. Motionless, alert, he stood outlined against the background of naked rock, with death spitting at

him from the opposite slope and roaring toward him through the blazing brush. His eyes never left the distant crest of the sag on the far side of the hollow. His cocked rifle was gripped in his sinewy hands.

Once more a passing slug screeched past, so close that its deadly breath fanned his face. But this time Slade had seen the tiny spiral of whitish smoke that marked the spot where the hidden drygulcher was holed up.

The rifle leaped to his shoulder. The stock cuddled against his cheek. His gray eyes glanced along the sights.

A puff of smoke from the black muzzle. Another and another. With each shot Slade shifted the rifle barrel a fraction, raking the bush from whence had come that telltale whirl of smoke.

Suddenly the bush was violently agitated. Something dark pitched from it, rolled down the slope a little way and was still.

Slade stood watchful and alert, his eyes glued to the brush-fringed rim-rock. But no more bullets whined from the gray-green bristle. The slope remained devoid of sound or motion, hazily seen now through the swirling smoke clouds.

Slade lowered his rifle.

"That's one we won't have to worry about," he told Lafe Sanderson, who had crouched as close to the ground as he could while the grim duel was in progress. "That'll be the jigger they had hang back to keep a watch on the trail behind and to signal the rest of the bunch when they had us where they wanted us. A salty outfit, all right. Don't stop at anything, and don't miss a trick. Let's go! That fire's almighty close."

CHAPTER V

The Trail to Tomorrow Land

THE rest of the cowboys had plunged on and were now some distance further up the slope. Slade and Sanderson toiled to overtake them. The fire was roaring toward them from both directions. Ahead was more thick brush, tinder dry, which would offer fresh fuel for the flames.

"It's burnin' faster up in front," muttered Sanderson, squinting through the smoke with puckered eyes. "Son, it's goin' to cut us off if we don't shake a leg. I believe the boys are goin' to make it, but it's goin' to be touch and go for you and me."

Slade nodded, saving his breath to climb the faster. The air was almost too hot to breathe, choked with smoke and flying ash. Ahead was a red glimmer that had almost closed the narrow gap that led to safety.

Another frantic hundred yards, and a gasping exclamation of despair from Lafe Sanderson. There was no longer a dark opening between the two racing walls of flame. In front, behind and on both sides was a seething inferno.

"I'm done for!" gasped Sanderson. "We can't make it!"

"Keep goin'!" Slade barked at him. "There's just a thin sheet of fire in front so far. We can dive through it. The rim-rock is close."

"D-done for!" mumbled the old man, and pitched forward on his face.

Walt Slade whirled, strode back down the slope, picked up the limp form and swung it over his shoulder. He gripped the bridle of Sanderson's snorting horse with his free hand, turned and surged forward.

"Trail, Shadow!" he called to the great black, who scraped and floundered over the stones by his side. "You can make it, feller!"

Directly ahead was the wavering line of flame. Slade took a deep breath, ducked his head and plunged straight into it. The heat leaped at him like a living thing, sapping his strength, seeming to dry the blood in his veins. He felt the sear of the flames on his exposed hands, heard Sanderson's horse scream with pain. He reeled, staggered, almost fell, borne down by the heavy burden of the unconscious rancher. His head swam, red flashes stormed before his tightly closed eyes. His legs were turning to water and buckling beneath him.

His groping hand encountered something rough and crisp. Although he could not see through the welter of flame and smoke and swirling cinders, he knew it to be Shadow's tail.

"Trail, feller!" he called hoarsely and grimly held on.

He heard Shadow snort explosively, felt him surge forward. He was almost dragged off his feet, but he managed to keep his balance and automatically work legs that did not seem to belong to him.

A final searing blast, a gush of choking smoke acrid with the steamed juice of scorched leaves, and then a breath of air, comparatively cool, that fanned his face. He opened his eyes that he had held tightly shut while in the thickest of the fire, and saw, directly ahead, a bare slope leading up to the growth-free rim-rock a hundred feet farther on.

From the rim-rock, where the Tree L hands were clustered, peering despairingly through the smoke, came a roar of voices. Men plunged down the slope to relieve Slade of his burden, to help drag the almost spent horses to safety. Others supported The Hawk, who quickly regained strength as he gulped in great draughts of blessed air.

On the rim-rock, which was comparatively free from smoke, Sanderson also quickly revived. He got to his feet, somewhat shakily, and regarded Slade.

"Son," he said heavily, "yuh can't thank a feller right for what you just done, so I ain't even goin' to try. Did yuh get burned much?"

"Oh, just a mite of a patch here and there," replied The Hawk, who was surveying the further slope, which was much less steep than the one they had just surmounted. It led to the floor of a narrow valley that extended due south for as far as the eye could reach.

"Didn't even hurt the case of my guitar," he said, with a chuckle, "and old Shadow didn't lose more'n a mite of hair. Reckon we all come out of it sort of lucky."

"I wouldn't call it luck," grunted Clate Gray. "I'd call it darn smart thinkin' on yore part that saved us. If it hadn't been for you, the lot of us would be buzzard bait by now."

The Tree L punchers nodded emphatic assent.

"Well," remarked Sanderson, "I figger we can make it down that sag to the bottom, and then we'd ought to be able to get back to the spread."

But when they reached the valley floor, the slope being negotiated with little difficulty, Walt Slade turned Shadow's head south.

"Where *you* goin'?" demanded Sanderson. "The spread is back the other way."

"After that herd," Slade told him grimly. "I figger this valley is a straight shoot for the river. Them hellions will run the herd across and dispose of it below the Line. I've a notion it'll be possible to get ahead of them and mebbe have a little surprise ready for 'em down in *manana* land when they get there."

"Yuh figger to go it alone?" demanded Sanderson.

"Would sort of help to have two or three dependable gents along," Slade admitted.

Old Lafe Sanderson turned his horse's head.

"Them's my beefs that's been stole," he said, "and I reckon I don't aim to send anybody to bring 'em back so long as I'm able to fork the hull."

CLATE GRAY also turned south. The rest of the Tree L hands followed suit.

But Slade shook his head.

"One more man, along with you and Clate, will be enough," he told Sanderson. "This is goin' to take some out-smartin', and too big a crowd is liable to smear the deal."

"That's sense," agreed old Lafe. He beckoned a rangy cowboy with sunken cheeks and deep-set eyes. "You come along, Carter," he directed. "Yuh're about the best shot in the outfit, and I reckon a good gunhand is liable to be in order on this trip."

As Slade had anticipated, the valley led straight to the Rio Grande, which they forded without difficulty. Taking a southward slanting course to the east just as night was falling they struck a well-traveled trail.

"I know somethin' of this section down here," *El Halcon* told the others. "A few miles farther on along this track is a town, and I've a mighty strong hunch that it is a *pueblo* that's used as a sort of clearin' station for wet beefs. Yeah, I figger it's there them hellions will make connection with a buyer. We'll get there first and see what's what."

Slade was right as to his bearings. Full dark had fallen when they saw ahead the twinkling lights of a town set in the shadow of a hill.

"But won't it attract attention, four jiggers ridin' in like this?" Sanderson suggested.

"Not if we play our cards right," Slade returned. "This is a lively little *pueblo* and lots of Border-ridin' gents drop along here from time to time. We'll make out to be a bunch in on a bust. Gents don't always mention down this-a-away just where they came from last, and it ain't the usual thing for anybody to ask questions. Folks here take yuh as yuh come, and yuh're all right till yuh prove otherwise. These folks down this side of the Line are sociable and good-natured, so long as yuh don't kick over the traces and rub 'em the wrong way. They can be plenty salty if necessary, but they ain't on the prod against strangers just because they are strangers."

As Slade predicted, the town proved lively. There was a lighted plaza, and a number of *cantinas*. Slade entered one, while the others waited outside, and inquired as to the whereabouts of a reliable stable in which their horses could be cared for. The courteous proprietor directed him to one and after giving the stable keeper a quick once-over, Slade decided that the cayuses would be safe in his care. This chore off their hands, they returned to the *cantina* and proceeded to simulate a carefree bunch out for diversion.

Slade noted that at the bar and throughout the room was a fair sprinkling of Texans and others from north of the River. Some had the appearance of roving cowboys who had drifted down this way, while others, The Hawk decided, were gents whose antecedents might not bear investigation; their presents neither, for that matter, and their futures were questionable.

A good orchestra played plaintive Mexican airs and there were plenty of sloe-eyed senoritas in evidence on the dance floor.

Chuck-a-luck games were in progress, three-card monte, and poker. There was a faro bank doing a rousing business and several roulette wheels spinning merrily. The careless garb of riders from north of the

River mingled with the more colorful costume of Mexican *vaqueros.*

Slade danced with several of the attractive, dark-haired girls. Old Man Sanderson tried his hand at chuck-a-luck. Clate Gray and Carter gave the roulette wheels a whirl. Together they had several drinks at the bar.

"We're getting away with it, all right," Slade told his companions. "At first we got some pretty sharp looks, but now nobody's payin' any attention to us. We'll take in a couple more places, and if anybody is keepin' an eye on us, they'll decide we're nothin' but what we look to be."

They visited several more *cantinas.* Finally, not long before midnight, Slade told the others:

"Now we'll get down to business. Across the street is our next stop."

He led the way to a *cantina* somewhat smaller than the others they had visited. A pleasant faced, comfortably fleshy Mexican standing at the far end of the bar glanced up at their entrance, stared, and hurried forward to meet them.

"El Halcon!" he greeted Slade in low tones. "Welcome, *Capitan!"*

"Howdy, Miguel?" Slade responded. "How's everything by you? Meet my *amigos.* We sort of hanker to put on the nosebag. Haven't surrounded any chuck for so long our tapeworms are figgerin' on movin' to new quarters."

The *cantina* proprietor led the way to a table and summoned a waiter. Sanderson and his hands seated themselves. While the food was being prepared, Slade joined Miguel at the end of the bar and engaged him in conversation.

"Amigo, who in this section buys beefs that happen to wander down across the River and get lost?" he asked.

The proprietor hesitated, glanced furtively over his shoulder to see if anyone was within hearing distance.

"I'm not on the prod against the buyer, no matter who he is," Slade hastened to reassure him. "I have no right to interfere with anybody down here south of the River, but I am sort of interested in a herd that might stray somewheres in this direction about tonight some time. Can't tell just exactly where they'll cross, but figger somebody here will know about it."

Miguel glanced around once before replying.

"Felipe Garcia usually buys the cattle that —er—stray across the river," he said in low tones. *"Si, Capitan,* it is usually known here in the *pueblo* when cattle drift this way. A messenger is sent from here to Garcia's *hacienda,* which is some forty miles to the south. The messenger arranges a meeting point for Garcia's agent and those who—stray with the cattle."

"I see," Slade nodded. "I wonder, Miguel, if there'd be any chance of that messenger being stopped, and somebody taking his place?"

Miguel raised his eyes to meet Slade's steady gaze.

"A suggestion by *El Halcon* is on order," he murmured. "Wait here, *Capitan."*

CHAPTER VI

Trail's End

MIGUEL sauntered casually across the room to where a group was gathered around a monte table. After speaking with several of the group in an off-hand manner, he strolled back to the end of the bar. A few minutes later a man left the group, paused at the bar, close to where Miguel stood, and ordered a drink. He had a lean, dark face, a hawk nose and high cheekbones. His lank black hair was cut in a bang across his forehead. A single glance told Slade that he was a pure-blood Yaqui Indian.

"This is Estaban," Miguel said in low tones. "He will stop the messenger before he reaches Garcia, and will return as the one Garcia sends to arrange the meeting."

Slade spoke in perfect Spanish.

"No killing, Estaban. No real harm must come to the messenger. He'll just be a hired hand working for Garcia and making what he figures is an honest living."

The Yaqui nodded his understanding.

"Come to me when you return, and I will tell you what word to bear to those who wait the messenger," Miguel added.

Again Estaban inclined his head the merest fraction. He finished his drink and sauntered out.

"Capitan, it will be simple," said Miguel. "Garcia always designates the point of rendezvous. Nor is the messenger who goes to Garcia and he who bears the word to those who wait always the same. But at the place of meeting, *Capitan,* I fear for you. Those who will wait the word are *muy malo hombres."*

Slade was willing to agree that the Harlows and their bunch were indeed "very bad men," but he merely nodded his appreciation of Miguel's well-meant warning.

"We'll want a place where we can pound our ears tonight and keep out of sight tomorrow," he told the *cantina* owner.

"Si," Miguel replied. "That I will arrange."

Slade and his companions enjoyed an ample meal. Meanwhile, Miguel arranged to transfer their horses to his own stable. Then he

conducted them to a couple of quiet rooms over the *cantina*.

"It's like this," Slade explained to the others. "Estaban will intercept the messenger on his way to Garcia. It's an open secret hereabouts that wet cattle are brought here and then driven south, where there is a ready market for them in which the local purchaser can just about double his money. Garcia is evidently the big buyer in this section. He's got plenty of savvy and keeps in the clear. He has men on the lookout here for herds that are bein' driven across. These men meet the rustlers and arrange for 'em to meet with Garcia's representative and turn the beefs over to him. My *amigo* Miguel always knows what's goin' on. I happen to know he don't have anything to do with this kind of a business, and so long as we don't make trouble for somebody on this side of the Line he's willing to lend me a hand."

"Yuh think he'll take a chance on gettin' the Harlows on the prod against him?" Sanderson asked.

"Oh, Miguel knows the Harlows ain't out to do any good for anybody down here," Slade equivocated. He did not see fit to mention that he had once saved Miguel's life at the risk of his own.

"But how will Estaban know who the messenger is?" Clate Gray asked.

Slade shrugged his broad shoulders.

"Trust a Yaqui to know everything that's goin' on," he replied. "For all we know, Estaban may be the messenger himself. Anyhow, he takes orders from Miguel, and Miguel figgers he knows what he's about. All we got to do is set tight, and be ready to act pronto when the time comes. Now I've a notion we could do with a mite of shut-eye. We didn't get much last night, and it's been a busy day. . . ."

They spent the following day in the rooms. Miguel himself brought them food.

The lovely blue dusk was sifting down from the hills and the sky was aflame with gold and scarlet when he again appeared, after supper. He carefully closed and locked the door behind him, glanced at the windows to make sure the shutters were tightly closed.

"It is done, *Capitan,*" he told Slade. "Tonight the cattle come to the mouth of Embrujada Valley, whence a trail leads to Garcia's *hacienda*. Those who bring the cattle were told by Estaban that Garcia's agent meets with them there."

"How do we get to the valley?" Slade asked.

"Trouble not your mind about that, *Capitan,*" the *cantina* owner replied. "I, Miguel, will guide you. Perhaps I may even be some small assistance when the moment comes."

"No sense in you takin' chances of gettin' mixed up in the shindig," Slade objected.

Miguel smiled, and shrugged his shoulders with Latin expressiveness.

"And there was not the sense, perhaps, in *El Halcon* once mixing himself in a—what you call it—sheendig in Miguel's behalf; but Miguel does not forget," he replied. "In the hour, *Capitan,* it will be dark. Prepare you to ride."

EMBRUJADA Valley lay like a gaping mouth in the craggy face of the hills. Through it flowed a trail, a trail that birthed in the awful gorge that bounds the Texas Big Bend country on the south. Southward the trail flowed, to lose itself among the purple mountains of Mexico.

A full moon was rising from behind the hills to the east, but the valley was still black with shadow.

From the dark north came a sound, a sound that steadily grew in volume until it identified itself as the slow beat of many hoofs. A vast moving shadow appeared in the mouth of the valley. It moved forward, ever more slowly, and came to a halt.

Other shadows detached themselves from the main body, moved still further ahead. Gruff voices sounded. The ghostly glimmer of the moonlight strengthened and the moving shadows were revealed as horsemen looming gigantic in the dusk.

Near the black eastern wall of the valley a tiny light flickered. There was a crackling roar and a soaring burst of flame as oil-soaked brush caught fire from Miguel's match and burned fiercely, making the scene as bright as day.

The Harlow bunch jerked their horses to a halt and sat staring in slackjawed bewilderment at the grim figures confronting them, rifles at the ready.

Walt Slade's voice rang out, edged with steel:

"Elevate! Yuh're covered!"

"Caught settin'," utterly astounded at this sudden appearance of the men they thought fifty miles distant, if they thought of them at all, the wideloopers hesitated, seemed about to obey.

It was Wesley Harlow who suddenly let out a scream of rage.

"It's him, cuss him!" he howled, and went for his guns.

A split second later he thudded to the earth, Slade's bullet laced through his heart.

The hills rocked and trembled to the roar of gunfire as the outlaws, galvanized by Wesley's reckless move, went into action.

Sanderson, Gray, and Carter, the lanky cowboy, were firing as fast as they could pull trigger. Two saddles were emptied at their first volley. Gray reeled as a bullet grazed his forehead, but steadied himself and downed the man who had shot him.

The three remaining outlaws whirled their horses to flee. Again the rifles cracked, and two riderless horses plunged forward and were entangled in the welter of terrified, milling cattle. The third widelooper, bending low in the saddle, veered to the right, flashed through the stragglers and thundered north along the trail.

Walt Slade flung up his rifle, took quick aim and fired. He saw the fleeing horseman wince as the bullet came close. Again he squeezed the trigger, and heard the hammer click sharply on an empty shell.

With a muttered oath, he stuffed fresh cartridges into the magazine. Then he ran to where Shadow stood, sheathed the Winchester and flung himself into the saddle.

"Shove the herd north!" he shouted to his companions. "That was Sime Harlow that got away, or I'm a heap mistook. Trail, Shadow!"

The trail was completely blocked by the milling herd and Shadow was forced to pick his way carefully over the broken ground to the left. Minutes passed before his irons again thudded on the level surface.

Slade settled himself in the saddle.

"Get goin', jughead!" he called. "That hellion's got a start now! Yuh got yore work cut out for yuh."

Shadow snorted, slugged his head above the bit and literally poured his long body over the ground, his hoofs beating a drumroll of sound.

Ten minutes later, peering ahead through the strengthening moonlight, Slade saw Harlow outlined on the crest of a distant rise and going like the wind.

Faster and faster sped the great black horse. His eyes rolled, his nostrils flared red, he snorted with the excitement of the pursuit. Slade encouraged him with voice and hand, steadied him, swaying his body in perfect balance with the horse's efforts.

Another rise swelling ahead, and again the fleeing outlaw came into view, much closer this time. He vanished over the crest.

Slade sent Shadow surging up the long slope of the rise. He topped it, scudded down the opposite sag, crashed through a belt of thicket, veered around a jutting shoulder of rock. Slade's hand hauled back on the bridle with all his strength.

Not two hundred yards ahead, rifle stock cuddled against his cheek, Sime Harlow sat his motionless horse. Slade flung himself sideward from the saddle as Shadow skated on legs braced like steel rods. The wind of a passing bullet fanned his face.

As he fell he gripped the stock of his Winchester. His one chance of life hinged on the rifle not sticking in the boot.

He struck the ground hard, the rifle gripped in his hands, rolled over and snapped a shot under Shadow's belly, knew he had missed. Harlow's answering bullet showered his face with dust. Blinking, half-blinded, he fired again.

THERE was a sudden drumming of hoofs. Harlow was racing his horse toward the fallen Hawk, firing as he came. Bullets spatted the ground beside Slade, whined viciously past. One twitched at his sleeve like an urging hand. He took careful aim and squeezed the stock.

Harlow jolted in his saddle and Slade knew he had scored a hit. But the outlaw still came on.

Harlow wore a large brass belt buckle that gleamed in the moonlight. Steadying himself, Slade outlined his front sight squarely against the shifting gleam and pulled trigger. He heard the bullet strike, saw Sime Harlow whirl from saddle and lie writhing on the ground.

Slade got to his feet and cautiously approached the fallen outlaw, whose movements were growing feebler. Another moment and he knelt beside the dying man.

Sime Harlow glared up into his face with eyes of hellish hate.

"You win, cuss yuh!" he gasped. "Why did yuh have to bust into my game?"

Walt Slade slowly shook his head. He was fumbling at a cunningly concealed secret pocket in his broad leather belt. He held something before the dying outlaw's eyes. Something that glittered in the moonlight. It was a silver star set on a silver circle! The feared and honored badge of the Texas Rangers!

Sime Harlow gulped in his blood-welling throat. He stared unbelievingly at the symbol of law and order.

"A Ranger!" he panted. "*El Halcon* a Texas Ranger!"

"Yes," Slade told him. "Undercover man for Captain McNelty's company. I didn't come to bust into yore game, Harlow. I come to bust it up. Captain Jim sent me over to Brewer County to stop yore ruckus raisin'. Crooked trails always have the one endin', Harlow."

Sime Harlow strove to speak, but choked on the blood in his throat instead, and, choking, died.

* * *

On the south bank of the Rio Grande, Slade and his companions shook hands with Miguel.

"Come again, *Capitan,*" the smiling Mexican urged. "*El Halcon,* the friend of the lowly, is always welcome."

Old Lafe Sanderson watched the *cantina* owner depart. He turned to Slade.

"Son," he said, "I've heard some funny

things about a jigger called *El Halcon*, but the next time anybody says somethin' about him that don't set just right, I'm goin' to smack that gent square in the snoot!"

The recovered herd was shoved across the River just as dawn was breaking, and headed north. A few miles farther on the trail forked, one branch flowing westward. Here Slade pulled Shadow to a halt.

"But ain't yuh ridin' back to the spread with us?" protested Sanderson. "I'd shore like to have yuh stay with me. Besides," he added significantly, "there's a big reward due on Sime Harlow, and I figger yuh're the feller to cash in on it."

But Walt Slade smilingly shook his head.

"Never figgered any good ever came out of that kind of money," he declined. "There's a feller over to the west of here I'm sort of anxious to see, so I reckon I'll just be trailin' my rope. Been nice to have known you fellers—we had a nice time together."

"Well, if yuh must, I reckon yuh must," said Sanderson, "but I still figger yuh ought to come along and collect that reward for yourself."

Slade again shook his head. He was thinking of another reward he was sure of—the nod of approval from stern old Captain Jim McNelty, the Grand Old Man of the Rangers. Even now he could hear Cap Jim's voice, speaking gruffly to hide his joy at the safe return of his best man:

"So! Back at last, eh? Well, it's about time! I got another mite of a chore for yuh that'll give yuh a chance to dodge work for another couple weeks or so."

Slade chuckled to himself, and spoke to Shadow. At a bend in the westward trail he turned and waved his hand to the Tree L outfit. As he vanished around the bend, there came back to the watchers at the forks the sound of a rich, sweet voice gaily singing a love song of Old Spain.

When Six-guns Roar in White Water Valley, Walt Slade Rides to the Swinging J Range to Clear Up a Savage Feud in

ROLLING WHEELS

Another El Halcon Novelet by BRADFORD SCOTT, Next Issue!

The Claus brothers started to shoot

TO MAKE A MAN MAD

By SAMUEL MINES

When the Claus brothers brace timid Rabbit, little Lee Wang's custodian, at the wrong time, they're plumb surprised!

IT WAS always quite an occasion when the Claus gang came to town. You'd have laughed till you sounded like a hoot owl to see the citizens galloping for cover, the bullets whizzing, glass coming out of windows, horses stampeding—if you wasn't running for cover yourself, like I was.

Shucks, I'm no hero. I'm as handy with a shooting iron as the next hombre in the town of Hopeless, Wyoming, but that don't mean nothing against the Claus boys. Like "Big Ed" Claus who could split the edge of a playing card at twenty feet. Or his brother Percy—there's a bad one. Seems like he had to be twice as ornery with a name like that to defend.

The one who run fastest every time was little "Rabbit" Thompson. He packed a gun like everyone else, but it was just show. He was scared to death of the thing. The way he scuttled for cover when trouble popped earned him his name and he never had the spunk to resent even that.

But this time the Claus boys went too far. I clumb out of the lumber pile where I'd been resting till the shooting died away and I see quite a collection of citizens gathered in the street. They were gathered about the corpse of Lee Sing, popular citizen and owner of the only decent eating place in town.

"This is the end," says "Gabby" Harkness, Mayor of the town, lifting a fist and shaking it. "Then Clauses have not only murdered a valued citizen of Hopeless in cold blood, but they have left us without a place to eat!"

"And made a plumb orphan out of little Lee Wang," somebody points out.

"By Godfrey, that's right!" Gabby gulps, turning pale. "Now we got a baby on our hands—and a Chinese baby at that, what can't speak a word of English!"

It was what a writing fellow would call an impasse. There wasn't a woman in town—only tough miners and cowpunchers and teamsters and gamblers and the like. This left nobody to take care of a baby.

Then I catch sight of Rabbit Thompson crawling out of the horse trough where he had taken shelter. Water is streaming from his hair and ears and boots and clothes. He looks like a drowned pack rat.

"There's the nearest thing to a woman we got," I said, pointing. "How about him?"

Gabby looked and his eyes light up. He marches over to Rabbit Thompson who is wringing water from his pants, catchs his hand and pumps it.

"Congratulations!" he booms.

"Huh?" says Rabbit.

"By virtue of the authority in me vest," says Gabby, "I hereby appoint you a committee of one to look after, cherish and provide for little Lee Wang, who has this day been most foully made a orphan of by them murderin' Claus killers."

RABBIT looks dazed. Then he gets it, and I hear his howl of anguish as he is carted off bodily to start his duties.

"Lemme down!" he screams. "I don't know nothin' about babies, I tell yuh!"

Pleading does him no good. We all tag along to see what happens. Little Lee Wang, who is about two, takes one look at Rabbit's whiskers and starts to cry in Chinese. It's plumb heartbreaking, and all them tough hombres stand around, shifting from one foot to the other and wondering what to do.

"All right," Rabbit snaps. "If I'm goin' to have to look after the kid I'll look after him. Now vamoose, all of yuh and let's have some peace and quiet!"

Well, would you believe it, after the first shock wore off, little Lee Wang got plumb fond of Rabbit. Nobody could tell the little shaver where his pop had went to and, at first, he looked mighty puzzled and unhappy. But he took to Rabbit all right and trotted around after him and minded him fine.

Rabbit got rid of his Chinese duds and tricked him out in a little pair of levis and boots and the kid looked ace high. He started to pick up some English words too. Rabbit sent away for a book on raising kids and studied it every spare minute, and pretty soon he was spouting baby facts like a spring freshet.

"Trainin' 'em not to wet is the biggest thing," he'd say. "I got to get him away from this three-cornered pants business. And you know what is the greatest thing in a baby's life? Habit. Yessir, just plain old habit. Get a routine and stick to it, and it's smooth as silk."

"You're a wonderful mother, Rabbit," somebody'd say.

He didn't get mad. He couldn't, seemed like.

"Little Wang is goin' to get his meals every day at the same time," Rabbit would say. "And he's goin' to get his nap every day at the same time. Skip a day, or change the time and pretty soon he gets the idea that he can pull a whizzer on me. Nossir, keep him on his routine and things is as simple as markin' yearlin's in a brandin' chute. So I don't want you whelps whoopin' around here at two in the afternoon, get it? That's when he takes his nap!"

Much as the boys would have enjoyed devilin' Rabbit, they wouldn't do nothing to disturb Wang, so for once in his life Rabbit got some respect for his orders and the shock was almost too much for him. He actually strutted around, the most important man in town.

His mining claim was no good anyway so we passed the hat and made up a salary for him and fixed it up so little Lee Wang was the town ward and he was official custodian. Except for missing a restaurant, life went on almost normal in Hopeless.

Rabbit was plumb happy. He was loco about the little kid and Wang was crazy about him. As soon as the button learned some English words, he was cuter'n a bug's ear. The whole blamed town used to come visit him every day and if you think that kid didn't know he was a celebrity you don't know kids.

By and by we got so used to the whole business that we took it for granted. But I reckon the Claus boys didn't, when they heard about it. They wanted to see Rabbit Thompson playing nursemaid.

First thing I knowed anything was happening was when I heard the sixguns starting to go and glass flying. There was whooping and hoofs drumming and people runnin' and plenty of yelling. I run for my lumber pile and peek out between the boards.

The whole Claus brood, six tough hombres, pound down the street, screechin' their heads off and firing their guns left and right.

"Where's Rabbit Thompson?" they beller. "Where's the whiskered, flea-bitten nursemaid? Yoo-hoo—Rabbit! We've come to see yore baby!"

The way lead is flyin' and glass is popping I see the Claus boys are tanked to the gills and ugly mean. There's no tellin' what they're going to do next. Little Rabbit is so scared of them, too!

They're ridin' up the street and they're opposite old Lee Sing's restaurant, which is empty, and right across the strect from Rabbit's shack. They get off their horses and spread out, advancin' on the shack and whoopin' and hollerin' and shooting like a bunch of Comanches. Lead is flying liberal.

"Come out or we'll smoke yuh out!"

Suddenly the door pops open and Rabbit Thompson is there, his whiskers bristling, his pink eyes flashing. His voice cuts through that bedlam like a buzz saw.

"Shut up!" he screeches.

Out of sheer surprise they quiet some.

"It's two o'clock!" Rabbit squeaks. "Little Wang has got to take his nap! You got to be quiet!"

Amazement holds them quiet for a second, then they like to die laughing.

"Who's goin' to make us?" Big Ed wants to know. He pulls back the hammer of his gun and splinters fly off the door over Rabbit's head. "Bring out the kid an' let's see him!"

"Quiet!" Rabbit screeches, hopping mad. "You can't interfere with the routine!"

I am shaking in my boots. In a minute those ugly, mean whisky sloshin' owl-hoots are going to get mad and shoot that little feller if he stands there yappin' at them.

BUT Rabbit is getting madder and madder as they keep yelling and shooting. Hardly knowing what he is doing, his hand stabs down for his gun.

Right that minute, I knew, any sort of fun or horseplay departed for good. The Claus boys saw him reach for his gun and it was business from then on.

The whole town seemed to rock and shake in the crash of guns. Little Rabbit stood there in the doorway, his whiskers bristling like a fox terrier's, his gun blazing, while wood and bark flew around him as the Claus boys let him have it.

Big Ed Claus went down like a tree crashing to earth. Simy buckled and slid to the roadway. Lake staggered back and fell against the wall of Lee Sing's empty restaurant. Jim dropped his gun and sank to his knees. Then Percy—the deadliest one—Percy folded like an empty sheepskin and fell across Big Ed's body.

The guns stopped. Rabbit Thompson stood in the doorway, a bloody smear across his cheek, dabbling his whiskers. He looked dazed, but he was untouched.

Slowly people began comin' out of their holes. They were thunderstruck, speechless, staring at the bodies of the Claus boys, the toughest gang in Wyoming. They stared at the little man who had wiped them out. They didn't know what to say.

"I—uh—" Rabbit cleared his throat. "They made me mad," he said apologetically. "They—they'd wake up the baby."

"B-but s-six of them!" Gabby Harkness stutters. "You got all six—alone! And we thought you was afraid of guns!"

"Well, they were shootin' so much their guns were almost empty," Rabbit explains.

"Don't you listen to him," I says. "He's just being modest. When this little feller gets mad he's dynamite and don't you forget it. I vote we take up a collection for a reward for Rabbit Thompson."

Everybody cheers and Rabbit looks dazed. But soon he starts to beam. Then they start asking him forty questions to the minute about how he killed six men with six shots and why he kept it a secret about being so deadly with a sixgun and all.

I slip out of the crowd. There are four empty shells in my gun that I want to get rid of and replace with fresh cartridges before anybody asks me where I was during the ruckus.

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Next Issue: GREENHORN GUNMAN, a Novelet by Gunnison Steele

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Now She Shops "Cash and Carry"

Without Painful Backache

Many sufferers relieve nagging backache quickly, once they discover that the real cause of their trouble may be tired kidneys.

The kidneys are Nature's chief way of taking the excess acids and waste out of the blood. They help most people pass about 3 pints a day.

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Don't wait! Ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, used successfully by millions for over 40 years. They give happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from your blood. Get Doan's Pills. *(Adv.)*

BRUSH POPPERS

By JOHNSTON McCULLEY

Ranger "Gunflash" Marken proves his right to his nickname when he finds that his nephew is riding with outlaws—and forces a powdersmoke showdown with a passel of desperate range polecats!

CHAPTER I

Ranger on the Job

THE hide of his dun-colored pony was covered with a mixture of salty lather and dust as Jerry Marken, Texas ranger, better known to his friends and enemies alike as "Gunflash," rode into the little border village of Rocky Bend in the middle of the afternoon.

Two things revealed that Gunflash was riding in a hurry and on serious business. He was traveling in the heat of the day, and he had no pack horse plodding along behind his pony and slowing him up.

Gunflash's eyes gleamed through the narrow space between the brim of his lowered sombrero and the top of his neckkcoth, which had beein pulled up over his mouth and nostrils to keep out the dust. Though he slouched lazily to one side of his saddle to relieve body fatigue, he was intensely alert. In a manner of speaking, Gunflash was in enemy territory.

As his pony picked his way down the last slope and neared the village, Gunflash's swift glance assured him that no ponies were at the hitch rails in town and none in the little makeshift corral behind the blacksmith shop. Only a couple of townsmen were in sight, and they were sauntering toward the saloon as if half asleep on their feet. Gunflash had arrived while Rocky Bend was enjoying the siesta hour.

The scattered adobe buildings were wind-blasted with the sandy earth and bleached by the relentless sun. Black heat waves danced across the barren surrounding landscape and rolled in billows toward the near-by sea of chaparral, that intricate maze of thorny growth which held mysterious trails, many dark secrets, and innumerable "brush poppers," evildoers wanted badly by the authorities on both sides of the Line.

As he rode nearer the buildings, Gunflash straightened in his saddle. He dropped his neckcloth off his face, then fumbled for a fold of it and wiped the perspiration and dirt out of his eyes. He wanted to be able to see everything quickly and distinctly—his life might depend on that.

He removed his right glove and flexed the fingers of his right hand until all numbness was gone from them. His holster had slipped back, and he shifted it to its proper position. He reached forward and loosened his rifle in his saddle boot.

GUNFLASH was more than six feet tall and built like a beanpole. He had black eyes and a mass of black hair. He wore khaki-colored pants, shirt and vest, and his boots were so worn and sand-blasted that they were almost the same color. Mounted on his dun pony, Gunflash and his mount merged into the general background of the parched country and made poor targets.

Gunflash was thirty, and had been a ranger for six years. He knew the sea of chaparral like a master mariner knows the ocean. On several occasions, Gunflash had ridden into that sea alone and brought out a wanted man, sometimes alive and sometimes dead and tied across his saddle.

Some enemies he had made in this manner were in prison, but others were alive and loose and would like nothing better than to open fire on Gunflash from ambush and shoot him out of his saddle.

The pony reached the bottom of the slope and loped on. Beside the blacksmith shop was a watering trough fed through a pipe from the town's one well, and Gunflash stopped his tired, thirsty pony and let him refresh himself.

Gunflash's weapon had cleared leather and was spitting lead

Nobody emerged from the smithy to welcome Gunflash. He could hear Joe Frish, the burly smith, snoring. He glanced through the doorway to see an old mare standing hitched to a ring in the wall and waiting to be shod when Joe Frish finished his nap, meanwhile switching her tail vigorously at the stinging flies. The mare bore the brand of Ellis Goodson's Flying G ranch, Gunflash noticed.

Alert and on guard despite the sleepy appearance of the town, Gunflash rode across the corner of the dusty, trash-littered plaza and stopped his pony in the thin strip of shade beside the hitch rail in front of Sam Wallis' store.

He glanced around swiftly and dismounted. Tying the pony, he got upon the platform in front of the store and kicked the clinging dust from his boots. He hitched up his pants and adjusted his gunbelt and holster, and while he was doing these things he listened to the murmur of voices coming from the adobe saloon only a few feet away. Gunflash could not make out what was being said. His arrival in town apparently had passed unnoticed.

He avoided the saloon and pushed open the screen door of Sam Wallis' store and entered. Gunflash blinked rapidly to adjust his vision to the gloom of the store's interior. Coming in out of the blazing sunshine, the place seemed almost dark to him.

No customers were in the store. Sam Wallis, the grizzled proprietor, was sitting on a stool behind his counter, dozing. He came awake with a start when he heard the screen door squeak and slam, shifted his spectacles from his forehead to his nose, and squinted through them.

"Gunflash!" he squeaked, as he got up from the stool. "It's shore good to see yuh again. How are yuh?"

"Right now," Gunflash replied, grinning, "I'm tired, dirty, hungry and thirsty."

"Shucks! Them things can be fixed up pronto. Outside of them, how are yuh?"

"Never felt better," Gunflash boasted.

He got out a sack of tobacco and a crumpled paper and began making a smoke.

"What fetches yuh down here this time?" Wallis asked. "Ranger business, huh?"

"Yeah," Gunflash agreed. He licked the cigarette paper and finished rolling the smoke. He snapped a match with his thumb nail and lit the cigarette and took a few puffs. "Where's Dora?" he asked.

Gunflash referred to Wallis' motherless daughter. Dora was twenty-four, a good-looking, capable girl who kept house for her father and helped him in the store.

"Dora's fine," Wallis reported. "She's takin' a nap now, I reckon. Yuh want I should wake her?"

"Let her have her beauty sleep," Gunflash replied, chuckling. "Not that she needs it much."

Gunflash's strident voice had penetrated to the rooms in the rear, and Dora Wallis heard it. Now she appeared in the doorway, looking sleepy but smiling.

"Jerry!" she called. "So you've finally shown up again. It's been the longest time—"

"Only a couple of months, but any time's too long when it keeps me from seein' you," Gunflash told her. "Every time I see you, you're prettier than before. You're sure a blossom bloomin' in the desert."

"And you're the biggest flatterer in Texas," she told him, laughing.

SHE walked forward and put out her hand, and Gunflash clasped it shyly. Gunflash had been in love with Dora Wallis for three years or more, but never had told her so.

He had a reason for keeping quiet about it. He believed that Dora was in love with his nephew, Jim Casson, son of his elder sister's unfortunate marriage with a handsome Border no-good. Gunflash had promised his sister that he would see Jim through the perils of foolish young manhood, and he thought a part of that promise meant he should stand aside, seal up his own heart and see to Jim's happiness.

Sam Wallis cleared his throat. "If yuh folks will excuse me, reckon I'll take a little nap," he said, grinning at them. "Yuh 'tend the store, Dora."

Wallis waddled away and disappeared into the rear of the building. When he was sure Wallis was out of earshot, Gunflash spoke.

"I got your message," he said to Dora.

"I sent it to you at the countyseat by a man I knew I could trust, Jerry," Dora told him. "I'm glad you hurried. I've been so worried."

"Yore note said that Jim was in some kind of serious trouble, and for me to come soon as I could. I was bein' sent here anyhow, to check on 'Snaky' Torsell and his gang of brush poppers. I almost ruined my pony gettin' here. Tell me, now—what's happened to Jim?"

CHAPTER II

Nephew Trouble

DORA sat on a bench beside the counter, and Gunflash leaned against the counter and looked down at her. He could tell she was really troubled.

Jim had been a wild boy, but he was twenty-three now, and Gunflash hoped he had settled down. Gunflash had got him a job with Ellis Good-

son on the Flying G about four months before. The Flying G was about eight miles from Rocky Bend, directly on the Border, and was a big cattle outfit. Ellis Goodson was a fighter, and brush poppers generally left his cattle alone.

"Jim's quit the Flying G," Dora said.

"Quit?" Gunflash showed surprise. "How come?"

"He had a hot argument with Mr. Goodson about something, and asked for his time."

"I'll see Goodson and Jim, talk to them both. Maybe I can fix it up, Dora. Jim's a little hot-headed."

"I'm afraid it can't be fixed up that easy, Jerry," she told Gunflash. "Jim came to town and got to drinking and playing poker, and —well, Snaky Torsell came to town with that Gus Beech, his right-hand man—"

"So they've come out of the chaparral again, huh? I'm down here to check on 'em, for one thing. But, what about Jim?"

"Snaky Torsell seems to have taken a fancy to Jim. He and Gus Beech told him how silly he was to work for small wages on a cattle ranch. And—well, Jerry, when Torsell and Beech rode back into the chaparral, Jim rode along with them."

"What?" Gunflash roared. "Why, the young fool!"

"He—he sneaked away with them, Jerry. I didn't have a chance to see him and talk him out of it."

"He's worse than a fool!" Gunflash exploded. "Snaky Torsell and Gus Beech are known murderers. There's dead or alive orders out for both of 'em."

"You've got to do something to save Jim, Jerry," Dora said. "You know how it'll end, if he joins up with them."

"Yeah, I know. Gun or rope," Gunflash said. He paced up and down in front of the counter for a time, and stopped beside her again. "I'm a ranger, Dora. I've got my duty. I've got orders to get Snaky and anybody ridin' with him—shoot at sight orders. But—there's Jim. My sister's boy. I'm only seven years older than Jim, but he's still a kid. He's got to grow up!" Gunflash seemed to be talking to himself.

"Jerry, you must save him!"

"I'll try," Gunflash said, gulping. "I'll try to save him for you, even if he ain't worth it."

"For me?" Dora exclaimed.

She looked up at him peculiarly, but Gunflash did not see the expression in her face, probably did not realize what she had said. He was thinking swiftly.

"I noticed a Flying G mare in the blacksmith shop," he said.

"Mr. Goodson and some of his men came to town early this morning and left the mare to be shod. They rode down toward the chaparral. Goodson knows Jim rode with Snaky Torsell. He believes Torsell is planning a raid on the Flying G, and that Jim is helping him, giving him information and all that."

"And I recommended Jim to Goodson, vouched for him," Gunflash said. "This is goin' to be just dandy! I might as well turn in my badge now."

"Oh, no, Jerry!" she cried.

"Did Torsell and Beech hang around the saloon while they were in town?"

"Practically all the time," she replied. "Lew Latcher, the saloonkeeper, is right friendly with them, you know."

"Sure, I know. Latcher's one of the gang. He tips off the brush poppers when we come after 'em. We'll get evidence that'll nail him one of these days."

"What can you do about Jim?" she asked.

Gunflash paced around some more, his head bent, his forehead wrinkled.

"If I can get Jim before he does anything wrong, maybe it'll be all right," he told her, finally. "But, if I don't get him until he's had a hand in helpin' Snaky and his gang do somethin' unlawful—well, I'm a sworn ranger, Dora. And I can't just turn in my badge and say I'm quittin' the service because my nephew has joined up with murderin' brush poppers."

Dora watched while Gunflash took his six-gun out of its holster and made a swift and methodical inspection of it.

"I might make this Lew Latcher do some talkin'," he said. "He's a sneak, noted more for cheap deviltry than for courage. If I can learn where Snaky is hangin' out, I'll go into the chaparral after him."

A CLATTER of hoofbeats attracted their attention then, and they looked through the screen door and windows of the store to see Ellis Goodson, of the Flying G, and three of his men dismounting and tying their mounts to the hitch rail.

They slapped the dust from their shoulders, got upon the walk, and finally opened the screen door and came into the store. Goodson was a huge, gray-haired man with an arrogant manner, and the three with him, Gunflash saw at a glance, were the toughest of the Flying G riders.

"Gunflash!" Goodson shouted. "Thought that was your pony at the hitch rail. Well, you've come just in time. That nephew of yours, the one you promised me such great things about, he's turned coyote—"

"Wait a minute, Mr. Goodson!" Gunflash snapped. "Let's get the record straight. I want to know what happened, first of all."

"Jim's been actin' funny for a month or more. A couple of the men spotted him out on the range talkin' to a brush popper who dodged back into the chaparral. I don't aim

to have any gang steal a herd from me and run the critters across the Line. So I jumped Jim about it."

"Well?" Gunflash asked, as he calmly began making a fresh cigarette.

"Jim told me he had a right to pick his friends. One word led to another, and he asked for his time, and got it. Then he came into town and met Snaky Torsell and Gus Beech and threw in with 'em."

"I'll 'tend to it," Gunflash said.

"Yuh'll tend to it?" Goodson roared. "I'm goin' to come in with all my boys and comb the chaparral and blast all that Snaky Torsell gang to here and gone! I'm gettin' at 'em before they get at me. I don't aim to stand still and wait to be raided and lose a lot of prime cattle."

"I know the chaparral better'n any man around here," Gunflash informed him, trying to keep his temper in check. "You go in there with a crowd, and you'll maybe lose some men, and you won't get Torsell or any of his gang. But I can go in alone, like I've done before, and maybe do somethin' about this. I'll locate 'em—"

"Yeah? Jim Casson is yore nephew, and yuh seem to think a lot of the no-good. Yuh go into the chaparral alone, and how do I know yuh won't just save Jim's hide and maybe make a deal with Snaky Torsell to do it."

"That's enough!" Gunflash snapped, his eyes blazing. "I'm still wearin' a ranger's badge, Mr. Goodson. You dare hint that I'd do anything crooked—"

"Forget it! I'm sorry I made that crack, Gunflash. But this thing's got me on edge."

Gunflash turned toward the worried Dora. "After my long trip, I could use a little of your cookin'," he suggested.

"So could we," Goodson added.

"I'll fix up a meal for all of you right away," Dora told them.

"I'd like to use that little shack at the back, as I generally do when I'm hereabouts," Gunflash put in. "I want to get some rest, and let my pony have some, then I'll be ready to make a move. I'll picket my pony and toss my stuff into the shack, then go into the saloon and have a talk with Lew Latcher."

"We'll go along with yuh," Goodson said. "It's common talk that Latcher is a spy for Snaky Torsell."

Gunflash whirled toward him, his eyes gleaming.

"I'm speakin' to you as a ranger when I say that I'll see Latcher alone," he warned. "He'd shut up if you and your men were around. You wait a bit, then slip out and get under that little window at the back of the saloon. Listen, and you can hear everything that's said. I'll take Latcher back by the window to talk to him."

CHAPTER III

Gunflash Gets a Message

GUNFLASH went out, untied his pony and led him around the store building to the little shack behind it. He picketed the pony and put his saddle and blanket roll in the shack. He watered the mount from Wallis' water barrel and tossed him some feed Wallis always kept ready to sell transients. And as he did these things, Gunflash was doing a lot of thinking.

He must prevent Goodson making a move and get to Snaky Torsell and Jim first, he knew. He wanted to save Jim from the consequences of his folly, wanted to reach him and stop him before he actually committed an unlawful act.

He had a "shoot at sight to kill" order on Torsell and Gus Beech and any men he found riding with them. But he wanted to bring one of them in alive, if possible. That was a matter of professional pride with him.

He finished his work and entered the back of the store building to find Dora busy over the cook stove. He could hear Goodson and his men talking in the front. Wallis had been awakened from his nap and was in there with them.

Gunflash went on in, examined his gun again and shifted his holster.

"Listen, like I said, but don't bust in and spoil things, Goodson," he ordered. "If I have to go into the chaparral after Snaky, I don't want him to know I'm comin', and you don't know how many spies he has in town."

He went out into the blazing sunshine again and turned toward the open door of the saloon. Joe Frish, he noticed, had come from the blacksmith shop, the mare undoubtedly still unshod, and had gone into the saloon ahead of him.

Gunflash paused in the doorway, then entered. A dozen men were in the place, which was a sort of loafing headquarters for the town. Joe Frish and another man were taking a drink at the bar. Lew Latcher stood behind it, listening to their chatter. The others in the place were scattered around at the card tables, gossiping and killing time.

Gunflash marched to the head of the bar, tossed down a coin and gestured. Lew Latcher, his eyes gleaming, put out bottle and glass, and Gunflash poured his drink.

"Well, Ranger, so yuh're visitin' us again?" Latcher said.

"That's right. Got a little business down this way."

"Hope yuh're not after me," Latcher said, laughing.

"I wouldn't know, Latcher. You been up to anything?" Gunflash asked.

Latcher moved nearer and pretended to be wiping the bar with his cloth. Joe Frish had nodded to Gunflash and then gone on talking with the man beside him. The others in the place were suddenly silent.

"Got a message for yuh," Latcher told Gunflash, from the corner of his mouth.

Gunflash squinted at him and nodded. He took his drink leisurely and started making a cigarette. He looked over the others in the room, and a couple of them, who were not townsmen, betrayed signs of nervousness.

"Who're the strangers?" Gunflash asked Latcher.

Latcher shrugged his shoulders. "*Quien sabe?*"

"Of course, you wouldn't know," Gunflash told him, with some sarcasm. "Well, I can go into that later. Want to have a little talk with you, and you can give me yore message, though I can't guess what it is and who told you to give it to me."

"Yuh'll be surprised."

"Maybe not. Let's wander back to the other end of the bar where folks can't hear everything."

Lew Latcher started there immediately, and Gunflash lit his cigarette and sauntered after him. He sat down at a table under the window. Ellis Goodson and his men had had time to get stationed beneath it, he thought.

"Latcher, I understand Snaky Torsell and Gus Beech have been to town," Gunflash said.

"That's right. They rode away a few days ago."

"I'm down here to get 'em, Latcher."

"It'll be a job."

"Maybe not. I've got a good idea where to find 'em. It'll be a shootin' matter when we meet, 'less they put up their hands pronto. And they probably won't do that with ropes waitin' for 'em."

"Probably not," Latcher agreed. "Don't yuh worry too much about it, Gunflash. 'Cause I don't think yuh're goin' to pester 'em any. I've got a message for yuh, I said."

"I'm waitin' to hear it, Latcher."

"Yuh know that yore nephew, Jim, rode with 'em when they left here, of course. I happen to know that Dora Wallis sent word to yuh."

AFTER a moment's silence Gunflash spoke. "Well?" he demanded.

"Jim is a young fool. Snaky told him some tall tales about joinin' up with him and gettin' rich quick, and the kid ate it up. Snaky wouldn't have a raw boy like him in his gang, and yuh ought to know as much."

"Well what about it?" Gunflash asked.

"Snaky took him along for a purpose. I'm tellin' yuh the layout, 'cause I know blamed well yuh won't dare repeat it to anybody. Yuh think so much of that fool kid nephew of yourn. Snaky is fixin' to raid Goodson's Flyin' G ranch. He aims to cut out a lot of prime steers and get 'em across the Line to a certain market."

"That'll be a big job," Gunflash said. "What was the message you had for me?"

"I'm comin' to that. The message is from Snaky. He's got a pal in the countyseat, and the pal sent word yuh were bein' sent down here again. The message from Snaky is that if yuh don't play the cards his way, there'll be shootin' when the Flyin' G is raided, and maybe somebody killed—Snaky not likin' Goodson much—and Snaky will pin the shootin' on Jim."

"If I don't play the cards his way, huh? How's that?" Gunflash wanted to know.

"Snaky says yuh can act like a ranger all yuh please. But yuh'll always travel in the wrong direction and never be able to come up with him. Yuh know how to do that. Yuh do that, he says, and he won't frame Jim, and maybe he'll even have Jim slip yuh a chunk of the profits—"

"Why, blast you!" Gunflash growled at him. "You think I'd wear a ranger's badge and turn crook, throw in with a skunk like Snaky Torsell?"

"To save yore nephew, yuh might," Latcher hinted. "Yuh needn't get mad at me, Gunflash. I was just told to give yuh the message. Better cool down and do some thinkin'. Jim ain't done anything wrong yet, and maybe he wishes by this time that he hadn't ridden away from here with Snaky and Beech. He's just a fool kid. Snaky maybe'll slit his throat after he's done with him, unless yuh make the deal."

"How do I know Jim is with him?" Gunflash demanded. "Maybe he left him, even if he did ride from here with them skunks. I'm goin' to ride down into the chaparral tomorrow, startin' right after breakfast: I'll find Snaky Torsell and learn the truth. And I don't want Snaky to know I'm comin'. Yuh'd better see to that!"

"What yuh mean, me see to it?"

"You're in touch with that gang. I know it. But don't send any messenger this time, Latcher!"

Gunflash glared at him, turned and strode the length of the room and left the saloon. He strode angrily to the store and slammed the screen door behind him as he entered.

Ellis Goodson and his men were in the store a moment later.

"Well, did you hear it?" Gunflash demanded. "If you did, you know that Jim ain't bad, that he's only weak and that all this is bein' framed against him. Comes the showdown, Goodson, the boy'll prove he's white."

"I'm hopin' so, Gunflash, for yore sake," Goodson said. "What are yuh aimin' to do?"

"I'm ridin' into the chaparral in the mornin'. I'm goin' prepared to shoot it out with Snaky Torsell and Gus Beech and any of their gang—"

"That's too much for one man, Gunflash. We'll trail with yuh."

"Then the gang will fade away into the chaparral and we won't get in touch with 'em," Gunflash pointed out. "It's got to be my way."

"We'll see," Goodson told him, smiling. "Dora's got grub ready. What yuh say we eat?"

"That's one thing we can agree on," Gunflash said, and he also smiled.

CHAPTER IV

In the Chaparral

THE ranger cared for his pony again at dusk, went into the shack and opened his blanketroll and made up the bunk, then drifted around to the front of the store and sat with Dora in the soft night.

Kerosene lamps were lighted in the store, saloon, and some of the scattered habitations. The night birds were commencing to call in the distant chaparral. Ellis Goodson and his three men had picketed their ponies, built a fire and made a night camp a short distance from the plaza, and had gone to the saloon.

"They're waiting to ride with you, Jerry," Dora said. "What are you going to do? How can you get rid of them?"

"I've got plans," he said simply.

"What you're going to do—it's dangerous."

"Everything's dangerous, more or less," he told her. "Don't you fret any. I'll try to get hold of Jim and get him away from those hellions and fetch him back. Maybe he'll have some sense after he knows what they planned for him. You don't want to hold this against him, Dora. Goodson is an arrogant man, just the kind to rile a boy."

"Yes, I know," she said. "I'm worrying about you, too, Jerry, as much as about Jim."

"Don't fret," he repeated. "I'm goin' to turn in early and get some rest. I'll be seein' you later."

"I'll have an early breakfast for you," she told him.

Gunflash got up and stretched and glanced down at her. The moon wasn't up, but a streak of light came through the screen door of the store and revealed her face. Gunflash thought there was a puzzled expression in it.

He told her good-night and hurried back to the shack, rolled and lit a cigarette and sat in the doorway smoking, after removing his boots. He could hear Goodson and his men making loud talk in the saloon.

Boots crunched gravel in the night, and Gunflash shifted his position quickly and reached for his gun.

"Gunflash!" a whisper came.

"Who is it?"

"Joe Frish. I've been watchin' for a chance to talk to yuh."

"Come on to the shack, Joe," Gunflash invited.

The huge blacksmith loomed through the night and stood a few feet away.

"I've got an idea about what's goin' on, Gunflash," he said, speaking in low tones. "Know more'n yuh do, maybe."

"Yeah? What about?"

"Them strangers yuh saw in the saloon . . . they're brush poppers. Got ponies staked out in the coulée behind town. Right after nightfall, one of 'em got his pony and slipped out of town. He rode toward the chaparral."

"Suspected as much," Gunflash said. "That's all right, Joe. Just what I wanted. Lew Latcher sent him, of course, to tell Snaky Torsell that I'm comin' after him."

"Reckon so," Joe Frish agreed. "Anything I can do to help, Gunflash? I'm gettin' sick and tired of the murderin' brush poppers, and I like Jim."

"Thanks, Joe," Gunflash said. "You might keep your eyes open around town and let me know things later."

"I'll do that, Gunflash. I'd better be slippin' away now."

After Joe Frish had gone, Gunflash got a blanket and left the shack and bedded down in the darkness not far from his pony. He knew the pony would raise a fuss if he was approached during the night.

Gunflash did not sleep long. Four hours after he had rolled in his blanket beneath the stars, he came awake, got up and stretched and put on his boots, and made the pony ready for the trail.

He inspected his six-gun and took another from his blanketroll and put it on, examined his rifle and made sure he had plenty of ammunition. He led the pony to the watering trough beside the blacksmith shop and let him drink his fill, and gulped the cool water himself. It was all the breakfast Gunflash would have that morning.

MOUNTING, he rode quietly out of the town, following a trail which ran toward the sea of chaparral. The moon was not up, and he had only the light of the stars. He was following a winding trail through the chaparral long before the moon came up, and dawn found him deep into the thorny growth.

Gunflash knew these winding trails. He

knew where they doubled back upon themselves sometimes, too, and he always took the short cut. In a spot where three of the trails merged and crossed, he rode into the brush and dismounted, leaving the pony ground-hitched.

Making contact with the brush poppers and getting to Jim was the first thing on his mind. Gunflash reasoned that they would come riding along the trail to get to a position from which they could watch the approach from the town. Snaky Torsell undoubtedly would go into ambush there.

Not for an instant did Gunflash believe that Snaky would wait to make any sort of deal with him if he could settle matters between them quicker by merely shooting Gunflash. After that, he would handle Jim in any way he saw fit.

It grew lighter in the chaparral, and the birds were hunting breakfast, chattering as they flew among the bunches of mesquite and cacti. And suddenly their song changed, and some of them chattered in a note of fear, and others were suddenly silent because of fear. Somebody was coming along one of the trails.

Gunflash glanced around quickly to make sure that the brush effectually masked him and his pony from all directions. He stepped to the pony's head and began rubbing his nose, prepared to grab his nostrils quickly and stop a whinny if the pony started to sound one.

He heard the soft plop-plop of hooves, and knew more than one horse was approaching, and that the animals were at a walk. Then he heard low voices.

"What are yuh aimin' to do, Snaky?" one asked.

"Well, Gus, I figure it this way—we know Goodson and some of his men were sneakin' around the chaparral yesterday, and went back to town. From what our man reported last night when he rode out here, I figure that Gunflash will try to get to us ahead of the Flyin' G men. He'll want to make talk on account of Jim here."

"I don't understand much of this," a third man said.

That was Jim speaking, Gunflash knew, and he was riding with Snaky Torsell and Gus Beech.

"We'll ride on and watch for Gunflash," Snaky went on.

"Don't yuh hurt him!" Gunflash heard Jim say.

"That depends," Snaky replied. "I'd shore like to have Gunflash workin' with us. He can't be bought with money. But seein' as how we've got yuh in our hands, youngster—"

"What yuh mean, yuh've got me in yore hands?" Jim demanded, a mixture of fear and anger in his voice. "Didn't I decide to throw in with yuh, and ride with yuh? Didn't I say I'd help yuh all I could 'cause I hate Ellis Goodson for him soundin' off to me the way he did?"

"Oh, that's all right, kid," Gus Beech put in. "Don't get Jim riled, Snaky. He just don't understand."

"I don't want Gunflash hurt, that's all, on account of somethin' I did," Jim Casson continued. "He's my uncle, and he's done a lot for me."

"Yeah, he got yuh a job of hard work at the Flyin' G," Snaky said, laughing sarcastically.

Behind the protecting brush, Gunflash had taken his second six-gun out of his belt and put it into the front of his shirt. He mounted carefully, quietly, whispering to soothe his dun pony. The pony was used to such moments, and made no sound.

"Don't worry so much about what we might do to Gunflash, kid," Snaky Torsell resumed. "First off, I reckon we'll talk to him some."

The riders had passed Gunflash and turned into a side trail. Gunflash urged his pony through the fringe of brush quickly, and a gust of wind made the brush sing at that moment, and Gunflash was unheard by the others. But they heard him an instant later.

"Hands up, gents!" he called from behind them. "Careful! This is Gunflash! I'm ready to do that talkin'."

CHAPTER V

All the Way

SWIFTLY they whirled their ponies to face him, and their hands went up at once. Snaky Torsell and Beech were confronting him, and Jim, as they turned, was a pace behind the pair.

"It's Gunflash!" Jim shouted.

"Steady!" Gunflash warned them. His eyes were shining like black beads. He seemed to be watching everywhere. The brush poppers were heavily armed, but they knew better at the moment than to try to draw a weapon and fire.

"I got yore message, Snaky," Gunflash said. "I reckon I understand the situation, all right. You do the talkin', now. And keep your ponies still. There's a dead or alive order for you hombres."

"Shucks, Gunflash, let's be friends," Snaky Torsell said. "I never did yuh any harm, nor did Beech. It's just that yuh've been on one side of the fence and us on the other. Yuh're law, and we're outlaw."

"That's right," Gunflash said.

"Why not come over to our side of the fence, Gunflash? Yuh don't make a whale of a lot of money bein' a ranger, and it's a short life."

"So's a brush popper's," Gunflash said, "'specially if he has a few murders chalked up against him."

"Jim, your nephew—he's thrown in with us," Snaky Torsell continued. "Yuh aimin' to shoot him up some? If yuh start a ruckus now, Gunflash, yuh might hurt one of us, but we'd get yuh. Then we'd 'tend to Jim, just to be square."

"What's the deal you had in mind?" Gunflash asked.

"Yore part'd be easy, Gunflash. Just don't catch us, that's all. Bear away on the wrong trail."

"If I don't?"

"Yuh got my message in Rocky Bend, yuh said, so yuh know. If yuh don't throw in with us, we'll fix Jim. I'm aimin' to kill that cuss of a Goodson when we raid the Flyin' G. And we'll raid it, don't fear! In spite of Goodson and his riders keepin' watch. If we have to do it, we'll pin the shootin' of Goodson on Jim. He had a row with Goodson, yuh know."

"Yuh'd do that to me?" Jim shouted. "Yuh'd throw down a pal?"

"Pal, my eye!" Snaky said, laughing. "Think we could use a green kid like you? Yuh'd be a danger to us. We played yuh along, yuh goof, to get our hands on Gunflash."

"Steady!" Gunflash warned again, as Snaky started to turn in his saddle. "You watch yourself, too, Beech! Well, Jim, I reckon you see what kind of gents you sided with, huh?"

He glanced from the others to Jim as he spoke, and he saw the boy's eyes widen suddenly. "Behind yuh, Gunflash!" he yelled.

Gunflash's first flash of thought was that Jim was trying the old trick to get him to turn, so Snaky and Beech could draw and shoot. But he changed that idea instantly. He heard a hoof strike a rock behind him.

Somebody had ridden up behind him carefully, he knew, undoubtedly one of Snaky's men. He dug with one spur, and his pony sprang sideways as a gun cracked and a bullet whipped Gunflash's hat from his head.

Then Gunflash's weapon had cleared leather and was flaming and roaring and spitting lethal lead. Gunflash felt a blow in his shoulder, and knew a slug had reached him. He shot the man who had come up behind from his saddle and saw him sprawl in the dirt.

Another bullet sang past Gunflash's head as his pony lunged to one side and accidentally saved him. Out of the swirl of pungent smoke, Gunflash saw that Sam Beech had jumped his pony to one side and had vaulted from the saddle and was shooting from a clump of brush. Snaky Torsell was off to one side, also, but still mounted.

"Now, I've got you, Gunflash!" Snaky howled.

Gunflash swung his gun toward him even as Snaky fired. Gunflash's gun clicked on an empty chamber as Snaky's slug hit him in the left hip. Dropping the empty gun, Gunflash got the second from beneath his shirt. Quarters were too close for effective use of his rifle, even if he had time to get it out of the saddle boot.

HE snapped a shot at Beech and sent him reeling backward. Snaky Torsell put another bullet past Gunflash's head. Then Gunflash heard Jim's wild yell:

"I'm sidin' with yuh, Uncle Jerry!"

Snaky cursed and jerked half way around and snapped a shot at the boy. Jim had fired at the same instant. His bullet thudded into Snaky's breast even as one from Gunflash's weapon caught the brush popper in the throat. Snaky Torsell was dead as he toppled from his saddle.

"Watch—Beech!" Gunflash called, weakly.

There seemed to be a film over his eyes, and he knew he was losing a lot of blood. He heard more gunfire, then silence for a moment, and then:

"I got him, Uncle Jerry," Jim called. His voice sounded weak.

"You hit?"

"Yeah—not bad."

Gunflash called upon his remaining strength and rode his pony to the middle of the trail. The man who had come up behind was dead. Snaky Torsell was dead. Gus Beech was propped up against a stand of brush, a vacant look in his face, his gun a few feet away on the ground. He still lived.

Shouts came from the near distance, and the pounding of hoofs. Around a curve in the chaparral trail rode Ellis Goodson and his three men. They jerked their mounts to a quick stop.

"Looks like things are settled," Goodson said. "Give Gunflash a hand, one of yuh. Look to the boy, too. Check these poppers."

"Beech—still alive," Gunflash muttered.

His vision cleared and he felt a surge of strength again. The first shock of his wounds had passed. But he was losing a lot of blood from his hip wound.

"Help—me down," he told Goodson. "Gus Beech—has to talk."

Two of the Flying G men helped him off his pony, and one slashed at his pants and exposed the wound, cut strips and made a crude bandage. Goodson and the third man attended to Jim Casson, who had a bullet through his shoulder.

Beech was still alive and muttering when

Goodson and one of the men half carried Gunflash to his side. Gunflash was holding his gun.

"Beech, you do quick talkin', or I'll finish you," Gunflash ordered. "You tell Mr. Goodson the truth. You got Jim drunk and made him come into the chaparral with you, huh? So you could try to make me side with you brush poppers."

"That's right," Beech muttered.

"And the boy hasn't done anything wrong?"

"We ain't pulled off anything since he's been with us."

"That's enough," Gunflash said, glancing up at Goodson, and the rancher nodded.

"Now," said Gunflash, "we'd better go to town."

Gus Beech was dead when it came time to put him on his horse. Three ponies carrying dead men across their saddles were led into town by the Flying G punchers. Gunflash and Jim were both able to ride.

They stopped in front of Sam Wallis' store, and everybody in town came running. On the way in, Gunflash had talked some to Goodson, and two of the Flying G punchers grabbed Lew Latcher and held him.

They helped Gunflash and Jim out of their saddles, and Dora began fluttering around them.

"Shucks, we'll be all right," Gunflash said. "I'll be a pest for a few days, before I can ride much. Jim ain't hurt bad. You can fix up the shack, and we'll make out there, maybe with good nursin' and eatin'." He tried to grin.

"Here's that Latcher skunk!" Goodson shouted.

"Oh, yeah," Gunflash said. "Latcher, before he died, Gus Beech said as how he and Snaky had got Jim drunk and took him away without Jim really knowin' what was goin' on. You know that, huh?"

A FRIGHTENED expression was on the saloonkeeper's face.

"I reckon maybe they did," Latcher confessed. "Wasn't any of my doin'."

"You've been spyin' for the brush poppers and workin' with 'em for a long time," Gunflash accused. "You ain't wanted around here any more, Latcher. I'll give you two weeks to sell out and get over the Line and stay there. You can find a buyer easy enough."

"Yuh ain't got any right—" Latcher began.

"I got evidence enough to send you to prison for a long stretch, Latcher. Mr. Goodson, you have some of yore men watch him till he's ready to clear out, huh?"

"I'll do that," Goodson replied.

Wallis and the others fixed up the shack and put in an extra cot, while Gunflash and Jim sat inside the door of the store. Dora was heating water and getting ready to attend to their wounds better. Goodson already had sent a rider to the countyseat for a doctor, but it would take him a day to get to Rocky Bend.

They helped Jim away first, to take him to the shack and get him on the cot, though he persisted that a shoulder wound didn't call for all that. And Gunflash found himself alone with Dora Wallis while the others were busy.

"Well, I—I brought him back to you, Dora," Gunflash said. "Jim will be all right after this. He's had his scare. Goodson will give him back his job."

"Oh, I'm glad!" she cried. "I was so afraid for him."

"You won't have to worry about him any more. He'll settle down, and you can get married. I've got a little money laid by, enough to help start the boy in business. Maybe your father would sell an interest in the store."

"What was that you said about me getting married?" she asked.

"You and Jim—"

"And whatever gave you the idea I wanted to marry Jim?" she demanded.

"Well, don't you?"

"Gunflash—Jerry—you're so silly blind! I don't love Jim. I worried and fussed about him because I knew how you felt about him—your promise to your sister and all. I was worrying about you. Jim isn't in love with me. There's a girl over in Mesaville he's crazy about."

Gunflash was watching her closely as she spoke, and then finally he read the truth in her face.

"Dora!" he whispered. "And I—I've been holdin' back, givin' Jim his chance."

"And keeping me waiting," she added. "Can't you say something, Jerry? Does a girl have to—have to come all the way and you not meet her—"

"Me bein' a wounded man, I can't get around much," Gunflash replied, grinning at her. "But, if you'll come all the way, honey, you'll find me right here waitin'."

Dora ran toward him, and Gunflash had one good arm, and that was enough to hold her tightly.

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Next Issue: HORSES DE COMBAT, a Hilarious Novelet by Syl MacDowell
Featuring Swap and Whopper at their Funniest and Best!

PUNCHERS CAN'T WIN

By SYL MacDOWELL

When the wandering waddies figure a way to beat the shortage of beeswax, they pop into a sweet mess of trouble—and pretty near everybody gets stung while a swarm of honeymakers goes haywire!

CHAPTER I

Unlucky Punch

ONE look at "Swap" Bootle and "Whopper" Whaley told that they were cowpunchers, or at least had been. They dressed the part, even to six-guns swung loosely at their hips. They rode sleepy-eyed but tricky cowponies. Their saddle horns were grooved deep with rope scars from many an exciting roundup and branding.

But Swap and Whopper didn't work any more at anything.

It wasn't that they were lazy. Actually, they were more ambitious than most men. Their ambition was to meditate and muse in the pleasant, peaceful places, to live each day for the best there was in it and to wander whenever and wherever the notion seized them; in short, to loaf for the rest of their lives.

They had pretty good luck at it—except that Whopper had a rare talent for getting them into difficulties.

The trouble with Whopper was, that he had a high-powered imagination that often got beyond control. The result at such times was, that he became the biggest liar west of the Rockies. He told such whoppers and told them so convincingly that he got into the habit of believing them himself.

SWAP

Out of this, situations arose that taxed the ingenuity of his little pardner. Swap was a small, round, shiny-faced person safely past the age of innocence, yet who had the fresh outlook and buoyant spirits of youth. He needed all his optimism one afternoon in Indian summer, as they paused in their autumnal drift southward, at a small crossroads store in southern Nevada.

They went in to buy a can of corned beef to go with some spuds and onions they had in their saddle bags in order to make some hash for an outdoor supper.

While Swap forked over their last half-dollar to pay for it, which left them with a dime, Whopper spied a punchboard on the counter. On a shelf behind the counter, was displayed a raft of attractive prizes, including a set of dishes, a large framed picture of an ungarbed female sizing up the prospects of a bath in a woodland pool, a handkerchief box that tinkled a tune when the lid was lifted as well as some other articles which Whopper wasn't strictly in need of.

Nonetheless he pulled up a stool, slid the punchboard under his long, sad face and studied it solemnly.

The main thing that he made out was that it said:

5c A PUNCH

He rubbed his lean, stubbly jaw thoughtfully then squinted one calculating eye up at the storekeeper, who was a tall, sourish citizen, bald on top with long, scraggly hair in back that gave him the appearance of a dissipated pelican.

"Does that mean a nickel every time a customer pokes out the little wad o' paper in one o' them holes?" Whopper asked.

The storekeeper grunted and nodded.

Whopper looked pleased and rubbed his bony hands together.

"Ought tuh be money in this thing," he said.

"There is," the other stated tersely, keeping a close eye on the punchboard.

"Then," Whopper declared, "I reckon I'll git busy and make some."

A Hilarious Swap and Whopper Novelet

"Miles of open country to fool around in and you had to come hellin' around here!" the man said to Whopper

He took a match end firmly in one hand and closed his eyes. He even held his other hand in front of them. Then he started jabbing.

Nearly every jab sent a little tightly-rolled cylinder of paper out one of the holes.

The storekeeper flung a puzzled glance at Swap, who was watching with the can of corned beef in his uneasy grasp.

"I never seen anybody punch a punchboard like that," said the storekeeper. "What does he think he's doing?"

"I—I wish I knew, mister," faltered Swap, fingering that one thin dime in his pocket.

He hoped, but doubted, that Whopper might have a five-dollar bill secretly stashed somewhere on his person. This would be to pay for his recklessness.

WHOPPER wasn't worrying. He kept at it until he had punched out all of the holes in the punchboard. Then he opened his eyes, scooped the rolled-up numbered slips into a pile and started counting them.

"Hunderd and eight, hunderd and nine, hunderd and ten," he finished with triumphant flourish. "At a nickel apiece, that makes five-fifty you owe me, friend."

The storekeeper, who was scratching himself in the ribs at the moment, froze suddenly. His bent arm resembled a plucked, folded wing.

"Your figgers are correct, stranger," he said. "Only it's you that owes me the five-fifty."

Whopper looked surprised. Even Swap couldn't tell if the surprise was genuine or whether he was feigning it. He laid a long finger on the printing on the punched-out punchboard.

"It says here, under the big-lettered word "WIN", it says five cents a punch. Which means every time I made a lucky punch I won a nickel," Whopper argued.

The storekeeper unkinked his arm and made an unpleasant strangling motion with his fingers.

"Didn't you ever play a punchboard before?" he demanded.

"Nope. Beginner's luck," beamed Whopper. "And I shore needed it, friend. Me and my side-pardner, here, we're strapped."

What freakish whim made Whopper do this thing even Swap couldn't guess. Did he imagine he could hornswoggle this hardheaded merchant? Was he as ignorant about punchboards as he let on? Or was it some elaborate and badly-timed joke growing out of his overgrown imagination?

One thing was certain—Whopper had gotten them into trouble. And it was up to Swap to get them out of it, as usual. Or at least, to try to.

Stuffing the little paper cylinders back into the punchboard holes was all that he could think of. He started to do so as the scraggly hair hackled on the back of the storekeeper's baldish head. He made a sound like steam escaping through his teeth. Then he grabbed the punchboard.

Swap dived for the door. Whopper was just one jump behind them as the punchboard whizzed past their heads. In dodging, Swap stumbled and fell in a swirl of dust. But that delayed him only a trifle. He was up and they hit leather together and were off.

They didn't slow down for a mile or more. When they did, Swap discovered the empty punchboard clamped under his arm.

"Look!" he exclaimed with mild annoyance. "When I dropped that tincan o' corned beef I must o' picked this up by mistake!"

Whopper eyed his little pardner severely, as though the latter were to blame for it all.

"Well, we can't make hash out o' that!" he grumbled. "And it also goes tuh show that a feller can't win on them crooked gamblin' devices!"

So now, with supper an empty prospect, they rode hungrily on and on until the sun lowered and set and the desert landscape was bathed in a deceptive afterglow.

CHAPTER II

One Sweet Time

SOUTHWARD through the stunted sage, the pardners jogged in a gloom that matched the thickening shadows. They hoped to sight water-sign before dark, for they had ridden far that day and their horses were gaunt.

They had good horses. They needed them, to get out of the jams that Whopper so often got them into. Swap's was an unusual bay-sorrel, which was the only way to describe an animal with a black mane and silver tail. Whopper's was a cheese-colored roan. It was an animal of unusual intelligence. As the land ahead dropped gradually, it lifted its long, mule-like ears and pressed forward, in the hopeful manner of a range-bred mount that scents water.

The knowing roan did not mislead them. Just at dusk, in a cut-bank, the refreshing greenery of a willow thicket hove into view. The roan nickered eagerly and broke into a long lope, for there was a grass flat just below the willows.

It reached the flat before Whopper was aware that numerous white objects surrounded them.

These objects were about the size of a headstone and set out in the same sort of orderly rows as seen in a cemetery. All at once the roan snorted and shied. It whirled and bucked just as Whopper was about to alight.

The maneuver caught him off-balance. He stayed on until the first half of the second buck. Then he rose in the air, loose vest-front flapping like the wings of a rocket bomb foiled of its objective.

He hit the grass in a tangled heap, and in so doing, managed to collide into one of the things that looked like gravestones.

A faint buzzing sounded in his ears as he sat up dizzily, a buzzing that he attributed to his jolting fall. Then a blur before his eyes and a painful sting on the end of his long, knobby nose caused him hastily to revise that diagnosis.

He leaped to his feet with a yowl as he was needled by other stings—on his long, skinny neck, his hands and on other portions bared when his shirt tail had come out behind.

He streaked for the spring which he hoped existed in the middle of the willow thicket. Fortunately it was there, for he ended his flight in a long dive that ended with a resounding splash. He clawed his way upright, sputtering and seated deep in oozy mud.

He spluttered and blinked awhile before he was aware of something that hitherto had escaped his crowded attention. Close by the spring glowed the embers of a small campfire. Beyond stood a tent. Beside the tent was a light wagon. Tied to the tailgate of the wagon he made out two burros, vague in the faint glow from the campfire.

That wasn't all. The tent flaps opened and a face appeared. It wasn't a pleasant face. It was whiskery and did not radiate with any noticeable expression of pleased welcome.

The flaps opened wider and the owner of the face emerged. For an instant, Whopper wondered how so big a man could have gotten into any tent smaller than a circus tent. The uncertain illumination made him seem even bigger as he strode heavily to the fire and threw on an armful of brittle, dry sage.

It caught in an instant and as the flames leaped, the camp scene was brightly aglow. Swap appeared and slid from saddle.

"That was a flock o' beehives yuh rode into, Whopper. Between you and yore hoss, quite a few got upset."

This announcement upset the big, barefooted camper that stood by the fire, pulling up his suspenders. He swore as he snapped them down angrily across his broad shoulders.

WHOPPER

"Miles of open country to fool around in, and you had to come hellin' around here!" he denounced in a rumbling basso. "Destroyin' property and committin' a nuisance!"

Whopper stood up, dripping mud and fingering the painful swelling on the end of his nose.

"It was a accident, friend," he pleaded as a fit of shivering gripped him. "We'll settle for whatever damage—"

"How?" demanded the practical-minded Swap. "This one last dime of ours won't pay for much spilt honey."

Such candor might have been admirable under other circumstances. Just now it was imprudent, even rash. The man by the fire swelled and expanded like a hot-air balloon. He advanced menacingly on Whopper, who was wading out of the spring toward the warming flames.

Hastily Whopper retreated into the black, oozy depths. The night chill of the high desert plateau was penetrating his sinews. He shook so violently his teeth would have chattered if he had owned any uppers and lowers that met.

The big man, who obviously was custodian of the bees, grumped by the fire for awhile, warming his huge, outspread hands.

"You'll pay all right!" he finally vowed in an ominous undertone. "The both o' you will pay for what you ruint. But before I make up my mind how, I'm takin' a look at the mischief you done!"

He slogged to the tent and came out in a high-collared sheepskin jacket and carrying a lantern which he lit. He went grumbling off into the darkness.

WHEN he came back, Whopper was squatting on a rock, trying to dry himself and thaw out. Swap was unsaddling their

horses, preparatory to picketing them.

He hastened this performance, vanishing for the grass flat, leaving Whopper alone to face the beekeeper's wrath.

"Tain't only honey I lost!" the big man blasted. "But honeycomb, all busted and ruinated! I can't get no more honeycomb because o' the beeswax shortage!"

"Mebbe something'll t-turn up," Whopper chattered. "S-some s-substitute."

An unpleasant expression crept into the shaggy giant's small, mean eyes.

"That's a good idea," he admitted with a mysterious leer. "And now's a good time to do a little experimentin' along that line."

He plunged into the tent and came out cocking an old double-barrelled shotgun.

"Experiment Number One," he stated with savage gusto, "is to shoot you so full o' holes that you can be sliced up into honeycomb, you sickle-shinned loon! Git up and run! I never shoot anything settin'!"

Whatever Whopper had in his veins turned to ice water. He didn't get up. His legs were too weak with fright. Besides, fast though he was on his feet, he couldn't hope to outspeed a double charge of birdshot.

With flight hopeless and resistance impossible, his fertile imagination was the only resource left by which he could hope for salvation.

Imagination and a glib tongue were what he needed now, as never before. The double-snouted shotgun was pointing at him and the man that gripped it toyed with the triggers.

"Git started!" he gritted.

Whopper cast a wild, desperate look about him. His frenzied gaze lighted on the punchboard that Swap had laid in the bed of the wagon. The punchboard honeycombed with small holes so much like the cells of the bee product.

Something clicked in Whopper's brain.

He rose to his full, lean height. His long-faced alarm had given way to an expression of confidence. He reached to his hip for a nubbin of plûgcut. His wetting hadn't hurt that. He fanged off a chew, which primed his powers of prevarication.

"Congratulate yoreself, mister," he beamed amiably.

The shotgun lowered a trifle.

"What for?" the other grunted suspiciously.

"For the good luck that led our strayin' footsteps in yore direction."

"Good luck?" yapped the bee man. "Good luck for who?"

"For you, friend," Whopper retorted, ambling easily to the wagon and flaunting the worn-out punchboard before the man's puzzled gaze. He rapped it impressively with his knuckles and spun it.

Swap returned in time to hear the rest.

"I happen tuh be Perfessor Whaley, inventor and exclusive sales agent for the Everlasting Honeycomb. Now while yuh'll rustle us up some supper I'll explain all about this priceless boon tuh beemen . . ."

After a hearty, free meal the pardners spread their soogans near the tent where Whopper promptly dropped into deep, untroubled slumber.

Swap wasn't so fortunate. He was wakeful and nervous. Whopper's schemes back-fired more often than not. And this huge, moody beekeeper didn't strike him as a good person to be around when the back-firing began.

Nor did it seem possible that the punchboard proposition could receive the serious attention of even such an ape-headed specimen. To Swap's notion, the idea was as full of holes as the punchboard itself.

The next morning, breakfast over, their host whanged a frying pan against a willow trunk and swabbed it out with grass.

"Now let's see you fool the bees with that dewdad," he ordered.

Whopper tarried over a last cup of coffee.

"Might take time for 'em tuh learn tuh co-operate, friend," he said, maneuvering for delay. "Mebbe yore bees don't know there's a war on and a beeswax shortage."

"Ain't had much experience with bees, have you?"

"Yup," declared Whopper, rubbing the welt on the end of his nose. "Plenty. Too much."

"Huh!" scoffed the other. "I ain't ever yet been stung by a bee! What's more," he added ominously, "I ain't ever been stung by a slick salesman, or my name ain't Buzz McGorty!"

He swept aside all faltering excuses and compelled Swap and Whopper to attempt a demonstration. As they approached the white, squarish wooden bee stands or hives, the busy insects could be seen buzzing in and out.

"Bees is the only critters that'll work without bossing," Buzz McGorty entertainingly explained. "All I got to do is slide in empty trays of combs and pull out full ones. And move the stands from place to place occasionally. Now let's see you go slide that Whaley Everlasting Honeycomb into a stand."

WHOPPER had the punchboard. He had taken pains to conceal the bright lettering about "5c a punch", which he didn't think Beeman McGorty had gotten a look at the night before. He angled cautiously forward and a bee zoomed past his face. He made a swipe at it with the punchboard.

"Don't swat 'em!" Buzz McGorty sang out. "Show that you trust 'em! That's the way to git along with bees. They're friendly little cusses and always willing to meet you halfway."

Halfway, thought uneasy Swap, would be a long way from here if he had his say. Not that he was especially afraid of bees. He was fearing the outcome of Whopper's darnfool notion of getting the insects to deposit honey in punchboard holes.

Whopper had to go through with it. Pulling in his neck and angling forward on tiptoe, he made for the nearest bee stand.

"Not that one!" yelled McGorty. "Go load it in one o' them you knocked over last night!"

He reached a battered, overturned stand, Whopper had to run the gauntlet of the others. He hesitated and cast a forlorn backglance.

"Go on!" the bee man bellowed.

"I—I just remembered I ain't watered our hosses yet," quavered Swap. He started toward the grass flat. Buzz McGorty hooked a hand in his collar and jerked him back.

"Not so fast, pumpkinhead," he said roughly, but not in bad humor. "It's funny nobody ever thought of wooden honeycombs before. But your pardner did, and I think he's got something. It'll save the bees a lot of time, not havin' to make their own combs, leavin' 'em free to produce more honey."

Swap wondered if he was hearing straight.

"Yuh mean—yuh mean—?" he babbled.

"I mean I want a big order of Whaley Everlasting Honeycombs and I want 'em sudden. So we got business to talk over."

As he finished he relaxed his collarhold and laid a heavy, sociable hand on Swap's shuddering shoulders.

Scared though he was, the little pardner wasn't blind to the advantages of getting a little ready money to rattle against that last, lone dime.

"How big a order, Mister McGorty?" he piped manfully.

"Three-four dozen to start with."

Swap hitched his collar back into place and rubbed his hands together briskly. This crazy project was beginning to show practical possibilities. Maybe this was one of Whopper's schemes that would turn out all right.

He saw Whopper, shoulders hunched and hat pulled low, still hesitating to approach the far stands.

"Ride 'em cowboy!" Swap yipped encouragingly. "Stay with 'em! Deliver the goods so we can start back for more!"

Swap's eyes were no longer glassy with apprehension but shiny with enterprise as he faced the big bee man.

"Now, Mister McGorty," he stated, "a deal of them dimensions will require a little capital."

"How much?" blurted the other.

Whopper, head down, had steeled himself for the effort. The charge of the light brigade was no braver than his advance through whizzing, humming bees. He got the punchboard into a stand, righted it and started back with long-legged strides. He had escaped unscathed. Maybe it was luck, or maybe the bees couldn't spare the time. More likely it was yet too early in the morning for the warming sun to thaw out their stinging apparatus.

He returned breathlessly to Swap and Buzz McGorty.

"How much?" the bee man asked again.

"Dollar apiece for Whaley Everlasting Honeycombs," Swap said. And then remembering the situation that existed back at the crossroads store he added:

"Plus five-fifty operatin' expenses."

Whopper reached them in time to hear that. And to hear Swap shrewdly add:

"In advance, Mister McGorty."

In loose-jawed amazement, Whopper saw Buzz McGorty fork over without a word of protest.

"When do I git 'em?" was all McGorty said.

Swap pocketed the money and started for the horses.

"As fast as we kin git yonderly and back," he promised.

The bee man clamped hold of him again. He lifted Swap's six-gun out of its holster, then turned and extracted Whopper's weapon.

"Not knowing just where 'yonderly' is, and to make sure you both won't forget to come back, I'll hang onto these as a sort of guarantee," he leered, evidently highly pleased with himself as he whirled each gun recklessly by a trigger finger.

It occurred abruptly to Swap, that Buzz McGorty's interest in those hard-to-get weapons was perhaps greater than in Whaley Everlasting Honeycombs. It might also be, that he had contrived this method of getting hold of them. Bubbling good humor, he blazed a shot from each, into the sod under their feet.

That hastened the pardners' departure. They scuttled for their horses, clamped on saddles and got going in record time.

IT WAS a foregone conclusion that the crossroads storekeeper would not welcome their return with friendly enthusiasm. He didn't. He must have sighted the approach of the two odd-looking horses. For when Swap and Whopper entered the store, the pelican-pated proprietor was cranking the old-fashioned wall phone vigorously.

Clamping the receiver to his ear, he got a quick connection.

"Hullo, give me the Sheriff at Red Rock!" he crackled. "Hurry! Hullo, that you, Sheriff? This is Bill Bibb. Listen, Sheriff,

I want you to come and arrest two bums that skipped a board bill. Yeah, that's what I said, a board bill! Quick, before they lope off again!"

Swap rushed to Bibb and laid a pleading hand on his bony, unsympathetic elbow.

"Hold on, mister!" he begged. "We don't owe for no board!"

Bill Bibb snapped the receiver on the hook.

"You owe for a punchboard. You owe me five-fifty for that—"

Swap planked down the money.

"And here it is!" he cried. "Now call off the sheriff!"

"Too late," stated the storekeeper indifferently as he scooped up the money. "He's on his way. And you better be."

Whopper pushed out his chest and looked important.

"Lookit here, friend," he said sternly. "We come here tuh help you make some extry profit offen them punchboards."

"How?"

"What d'yuh do with 'em when they're punched out?"

"Chuck 'em in the cellar."

"Save 'em, yuh mean?"

"For kindling, yeah."

"How many yuh got down there?" Swap demanded eagerly.

"Dunno."

"Three-four dozen?"

"Might be. Why?"

"We'll take 'em off yore hands, Mister Bibb. We'll pay for them no-good punchboards. We'll pay yuh dollar a dozen, how's that?"

Bill Bibb was not easily surprised. But here was something new in his merchandising experience.

"The first time you showed up here I suspected you was nuts," he informed them. "Now I know it. But they're yours, holes and all. Go git 'em."

The pardners clattered down the cellar steps. Their money-making motive was strengthened now by the urge to regain their six-guns from Buzz McGorty. They didn't especially need guns, but those side arms were about the only things they owned of any value, except their horses. They had refused tempting offers for them. In Nevada there was a sharp demand for anything that would shoot. A pair of six-guns was as good as money in the bank.

Beside the hot-air furnace, they dug out, dusted and counted 33 punchboards that had served their day in tempting the venturesome and unwary customers of the Bibb store.

They lugged them upstairs where the careful Bill Bibb recounted them, then calculated.

"That'll be two dollars and seventy-five cents," he said.

"We'll pay it," Swap said, "just as soon as—"

Bill Bibb's mouth puckered like a purse with the drawstring pulled tight.

"Pay now," he demanded, "or pack 'em back downstairs."

"But Mister Bibb—!" Swap started to protest.

Whopper's peculiar ability to stretch and rearrange facts came to the rescue.

"C'mon, Swap," he said grandly, starting out. "There's bigger places and bigger people which kin furnish us more punchboards than this cheese-and-cracker peddler ever seen. They might even give 'em away free, in order tuh git our bizness."

"Wait a minute!" Bill Bibb called out hastily. He fingered his scraggly back-locks. "You mean to say you want *more* punchboards?"

"All we kin git," Whopper said. "Most places is glad to be rid of 'em, even would pay us for luggin' 'em off. In offerin' you money for same, we just felt charitable. Keep yore measly punchboards, friend."

Bill Bibb swiftly decided that $2.75 on the books was better than nothing, especially since he wasn't out anything.

He was about to say he'd let go of them on a credit basis when Whopper, posing impressively by the door, continued.

"Besides, friend, there's more to this deal than just money. There's the patriotic side of it."

"What d'you want these things for, anyhow?" the storekeeper demanded curiously.

"We're honey punchers," Swap told him.

"And we're puttin' waste articles to use, as a war service," Whopper went on. "Yuh're passin' up a chance tuh identify yoreself with the Whaley Anti-War Waste Association, friend. Yuh're spurnin' a noble cause."

BILL BIBB was getting a little confused. He said what he hoped would end the whole matter.

"Take the boards," he said, "and make dust."

"And in days tuh come," Whopper said, warming up to his topic, "when other folks have got medals and the gratitude of their feller citizens and the satisfaction of havin' done their part, when them days come what'll you have, friend?"

Bill Bibb was starting to be impressed.

"I dunno," he mumbled. "What?"

"Yuh'll have a cellarful o' empty punchboards."

"But I said take the blame things!"

Whopper relented a little. He ambled back to the counter. His eye roved to a shelf.

"Is that Honeydew Plugcut I see there?" he inquired.

"The genuine article, you bet."

"Not if it ain't got my endorsement on the label it ain't. Let's have a look."

By the time Swap had roped and loaded the punchboards on back of their saddles, Whopper had talked Bill Bibbs out of a slab of plugcut almost the size of one of the punchboards.

They headed back for Buzz McGorty's bee camp well satisfied with their transaction.

"We'll collect thirty-three dollars from Mister McGorty, git our guns back and then travel," enthused Swap. "After settlin' with Mister Bibb, we'll have twenty dollars and twenty-five cents clean profit on the deal. That'll carry us in grand style for the next month."

Whopper didn't share those feelings. He was full of self-confidence and plugcut and as so often happened, he had lied so well that he had convinced himself of a great future in store for the Whaley Everlasting Honeycomb enterprise.

"Why let go of a good thing just when we git it started?" he objected. "If we remain around we kin sell that bee man every throwed away punchboard in this part of Nevada. We kin make a pile o' money. When we git rich enough we kin buy up a ranch and a store too mebbe, and have our own punchboards."

He was still dreaming up all manner of good things when they sighted the willows and the grass flat. Swap shut him off with a wail of dismay. "Look, Whopper, the bee stands, they're gone!"

Whopper came back to earth with a thud. They gave spur to the bay-sorrel and the cheese-colored roan, hurrying to the camp-spot by the spring.

Nothing was there—no tent, no wagon, no burros and no Buzz McGorty.

Whopper stifled a groan.

"Looks like our customer has vamoosed!"

"With our six-guns!" croaked Swap.

CHAPTER III

Stung Again

THE first thing to do was to unload the fool punchboards, which they did, heaping them loosely on the open ground where the stands had been.

The next thing to do was to follow Buzz McGorty and regain their property. It would not have been difficult to track the wagon across the open sage country.

But neither Swap nor Whopper had any urgent desire to come to grips with some three hundred pounds of cussedness empty-handed. McGorty was too many people for them when they had their guns. Now, with the weapons in his possession, plus his own double-barrelled scatterspout, their prospects of obtaining a fair deal were not promising.

"Well, it's good we didn't pay Mister Bibb for these here no-good punchboards," quavered Swap, who always tried to see the bright side. "Reckon we better take 'em back?"

Whopper squatted dejectedly on the rock by the dead campfire, elbows on knees, head between his two hands, staring dully into space.

"Have yuh fergot about the Sheriff that old Bibb telyphoned to? He's likely tuh be at the store by now."

"What of it? We ain't committed no crime!"

"Nope, we haven't. But you know how Sheriffs are. After that sheriff dingles all the way out tuh the Bibb store, he'll be plum unhappy if he has tuh go away empty-handed. He could ask us a heap of embarrassing questions. Might even make us go tuh work."

That latter, in Whopper's opinion, was the supreme penalty. Swap shuddered at that dire possibility.

"Then we better remain right here till we decide what's best," he sighed.

Whopper nodded unhappily. The course of least resistance always appealed to him. Of course, they had nothing to eat except a few onions and potatoes. But something would turn up. It always had.

So he found a warm, sunny spot in the grass and stretched out, hat tilted over his long nose and sought his ease. Swap unsaddled and put the horses to graze. As he did so, his attention was attracted to the whizzing activity of honey-making insects returning pollen-laden from their rounds amid the desert bloom.

With Buzz McGorty gone with his hives, Swap was surprised at the lingering presence of bees.

"He must o' hauled out and left some," he reasoned to himself. "Now here they are, homeless like us."

But he didn't worry about it too much. He didn't have any powerful affection for bees. Although his interest in them perked up a little when he returned to the dozing Whopper and saw them swarming on and under the hat that covered his pardner's face, seeking some place to deposit their burden of sweets. Perhaps they had been attracted by the buzzing sounds that came from under the hive-sized hat. When Whopper slept, he sounded like a colony of hard-working bees.

Swap got a fire going and put some potatoes to bake in the ashes. He bathed in the trickling runoff from the spring and washed his underwear, laying it in the grass to dry. A flock of sage hens came in to drink and he succeeded in stunning one with a well-thrown rock.

The aroma of broiling wildfowl awakened Whopper, who sat up and fanned himself free of bees. A providential something had turned up, as usual. They ate well and lazed around until startime, then crawled into their soogans and sought surcease from their woes.

This was their way of life—precarious but never dull. Freedom was theirs, freedom more complete than other men dared to dream of.

Born a century sooner, Swap and Whopper with their love of wandering might have become frontier notables. Nowadays, they were regarded as saddle bums by the undiscerning majority who thought that the measure of a man's worth was the amount of his needs.

Swap and Whopper needed next to nothing. Their solemn belief was that toil was too high a price to pay for the superfluous possessions they were happier without.

They awakened next morning under a warming sun and looked about for what manna from heaven might have descended during the night.

Something of the sort had occurred. McGorty's lost bees buzzed around the scattered heap of punchboards. Swap made a brief tour of inspection and rushed back to his pardner in a state of awed wonder.

"They're fillin' them punchboard holes full o' honey!" he yelped. "What'll we do?"

Whopper, caught in the middle of a yawn, ended it with a grunt of surprise.

"They're makin' a nice, neat job of it!" Swap babbled on. "Yuh'd swear them punchboards had never been used, the way they've plugged up the holes with beeswax!"

"If we only had some flapjacks," mused Whopper hungrily, "we could have breakfast."

Then he bit off a hunk of plugcut and gave the situation deeper thought. A chew always oiled up his mental processes. All at once he pounced on an inspiration that made him forget all about flapjacks.

"Here's what we'll do!" he yapped wildly. "Them punchboards look like they ain't been used! We'll peddle them back tuh the Bibb store!"

"Not much!" Swap objected vigorously. "That'd be plum crooked!"

"Nuthin' crooked about it," Whopper declared.

"With that Sheriff hangin' around, we'll be in the lockup in a hurry!"

"Yuh're jumpin' at the wrong conclusions," Whopper said. "Just leave it tuh me."

Swap had left things to Whopper before. Recollection of it didn't arouse his enthusiasm for this undertaking.

"We can't handle them punchboards full o' bees," he objected.

"We'll smudge 'em out."

"Well, we can't smudge ourselves out o' jail!"

"Can't you think about anything pleasant, when we got a million bucks practically in our pockets?" Whopper frowned. "Now c'mon, let's smudge out them bees."

CHAPTER IV

That Sheriff

RELUCTANTLY Swap helped load the horses with the honey-filled punchboards and together they headed back for the Bibb store. The little pardner's uneasiness increased when they reached the crossroads and saw a horse standing in the small shade of a juniper.

"It's that sheriff, ten tuh one," he warned. "And when you try tuh sell these second-hand punchboards back tuh Mister Bibb he'll have us."

"What for?"

"For swindlin'!"

Whopper bit off a half-acre of plugcut.

"You always claimed tuh be a optimist," he said severely. "But yuh shore don't sound like one now. A man would think yuh don't want tuh git rich and have punchboard suckers and bees workin' for yuh all over Nevada."

"How yuh figger that?"

"Soon as I close this deal with the Bibb store, we'll buy all the used punchboards from Reno tuh Las Vegas!"

It sounded fine. Whopper's schemes usually did. Ready for the worst, Swap was persuaded to go into the store, taking a few samples of the punchboards that Whopper proposed to sell back to the hard-headed Bill Bibb.

A loosely-built man leaned on the counter, stroking his long mustache, talking to the proprietor. On sighting the pardners, Bibbs eyebrows lifted.

"Here they are, Sheriff," he warned. "Look out! These harmless ones can git dangerous overnight!"

"Howdy, friends!" Whopper greeted blatantly. "Plum sorry tuh interrupt, but we got a soft place in our hearts for this place and have brung the opportunity of a lifetime."

"Opportunity for what?" asked Bill Bibb.

"Tuh become exclusive sales agent in these parts for the Whaley Everlasting Honeycomb!" Whopper announced.

Bill Bibb flung a sideglance at the Sheriff. Swap hovered near the door. Whopper beckoned him forward.

"Lay them samples on the counter for inspection," he ordered.

Swap came crabwise, ready to bolt at the first sign of trouble. Bibb and the Sheriff looked at the punchboards.

"Looks like they ain't been used!" the storekeeper spoke up in surprise.

"Not just used, but proved!" Whopper told him. "They're yores, all we got, for a dollar apiece."

"But I gave 'em to you free only yesterday!"

"Tastes like honey," he reported, sucking an end of his mustache.

The moment was ripe. Whopper saw that and he knew when to close a transaction. He motioned Swap.

"Bring in the rest o' them Whaley Everlasting Honeycombs," he requested, "while friend Bibb leaps at the opportunity tuh pay over thirty-three dollars for same."

Bill Bibb wasn't doing any visible leaping. But Swap went out and unloaded the horses, still numb with surprise at the evident success of this latest and oddest of Whopper's many fantastic schemes. He reflected with a glow of satisfaction that they could get along all winter on $33. They could proceed leisurely southward and bask in the sun in untroubled ease, and listen to bees drone in the flowers.

How Well Do Yuh Know Yore West?

HOMBRES and hombresses, here are five more questions tuh test yore knowledge of the West. If yuh kin give the plumb proper replies tuh three out of the five, yuh're shore savvy. If yuh kin do better than that, yuh're a top-hand. So try yore skill—and check on yore answers on Page 80.

1. What was the real name of the bandit known as Billy the Kid?
2. Who was known by friendly Indians as "Pahaska?"
3. Who was elected President of Mexico in the same year in which the Civil War began in the United States?
4. What is a honda?
5. Where are the Carlsbad Caverns?

The Sheriff's eyes glinted. He tugged his mustache harder. Perhaps his trip to the Bibb store wasn't wasted after all.

"That was yestiddy," Whopper orated. "Today yuh see yore wore-out punchboards turned into Whaley Everlasting Honeycombs, each hole filled with honey an' neatly plugged up with beeswax. They'll sell like—like flapjacks."

"Who to?"

"Tuh all the bee men in these parts that know a good thing when they see it! Or ain't yuh heerd, friend, that there's a big beeswax shortage?"

The light dawned on Swap. This wasn't a swindle after all. He went limp with relief. Whopper was reckless with the truth but honorable otherwise. Even Bill Bibb was impressed but the Sheriff seemed disappointed. He couldn't arrest a man for being a liar. Bibb, hard-headed business man that he was, punched out a hole.

"Looks like honey," he admitted wonderingly.

The Sheriff punched another and touched a finger to his lips.

There was only one fly—or bee—in the ointment. That was, they had lost their six-guns in this venture. Swap missed the reassuring sag of a weighted holster. It wasn't that he or Whopper ever needed guns. But wearing them gave them confidence to face difficult situations that often arose out of their uncertain way of living.

He carried honey-filled punchboards into the store, armload at a time, and was returning to the horses for the last stack of them when he saw a wiggly-wheeled vehicle approaching from the southeast. It was a light wagon hitched to a span of burros whose ears lopped in rhythm to their plodding gait. The spring seat sagged under the weight of a driver who was about the size of a bag of wool, making the burros seem diminutive by comparison.

Buzz McGorty obviously was coming to the Bibb store for supplies. What if the proprietor tried to sell him some Whaley Everlasting Honeycombs? Then indeed would come the backfire that Swap had dreaded from the start.

He dashed into the store, hoarse with

fright, and blurted the warning to Whopper, who waited as Bill Bibb slowly counted out $33 in one-dollar bills.

Whopper listened gravely, rolling a quid of plugcut from one hollow, stubby cheek to the other. He showed no alarm.

"Let's vamoose, quick!" Swap chattered. "Before it's too late!"

STILL Whopper dallied. It wasn't like him. In build and temperament he was like a jackrabbit and had the jackrabbit's theory that speed was a better way out of trouble than meeting it head-on.

But Whopper didn't choose to run today. He even smiled confidently.

"Didn't yuh hear what I said?" gibbered Swap.

Whopper spit at a sawdust box.

"Shore, I heerd."

"So did I!" spoke up the Sheriff suspiciously. "What's the rush? Why you so anxious to vamoose?"

"We ain't vamoosin'," Whopper told him. "No sir, not us. We're stayin' right here tuh see justice done."

As he said that, the loose-spoked wagon rattled to a stop. Buzz McGorty hopped down and shambled into the store.

His glowering gaze pounced on Swap and Whopper. He saw the punchboards as Swap tried to duck behind them. He uttered a wall-shaking blare of mingled oaths and accusations. The gist of it was that they owed him $5.50 and he proposed to collect the equivalent of that sum out of their respective hides.

Whopper didn't flinch. He faced the unfair accusation with the scorn of a man who had never known fear. He didn't even shy away as the towering bee man bore down on him, a human steam roller capable of flattening any opposition into oblivion.

Instead, Whopper wiggled a finger at the long-mustached guardian of law and order.

"Sheriff," he said firmly, "this big bag o' breeze stole two guns from me and my sidepardner. Shouldn't wonder but they're out in his rig right now."

Buzz McGorty jerked to a halt. He transferred his stormy gaze to the action-craving Sheriff, whom he either had failed to recognize or else did not know.

He whooshed once and seemed to shrink a little.

"Grab him," Whopper ordered calmly. "Toss him in the cooler. We'll follow along and swear out complaints."

Buzz McGorty's fists unknotted. He tried to grin but his heart wasn't in it and his face wasn't used to the expression. He managed only to look very foolish.

"Aw now!" he burbled. "It was just a little joke!"

The Sheriff twirled his mustache.

"Where's said purloined property?" he demanded sternly.

Buzz McGorty shrunk a few sizes smaller.

"I'll go git it," he said meekly.

He returned promptly from a visit to the wagon, ceremoniously handing over the six-guns to each of the pardners. But with a glow in his small eyes that bode ill should they meet again under circumstances more to his liking.

"Thirty-one, thirty-two, thirty-three," finished Bill Bibb, laying out the last dollar bill with a lingering caress. Then he turned his attention to the customer.

"Howdy, Buzz," he greeted, smoothing down his pelican-like crest. "You showed up just in time."

"Did I?" McGorty asked dourly.

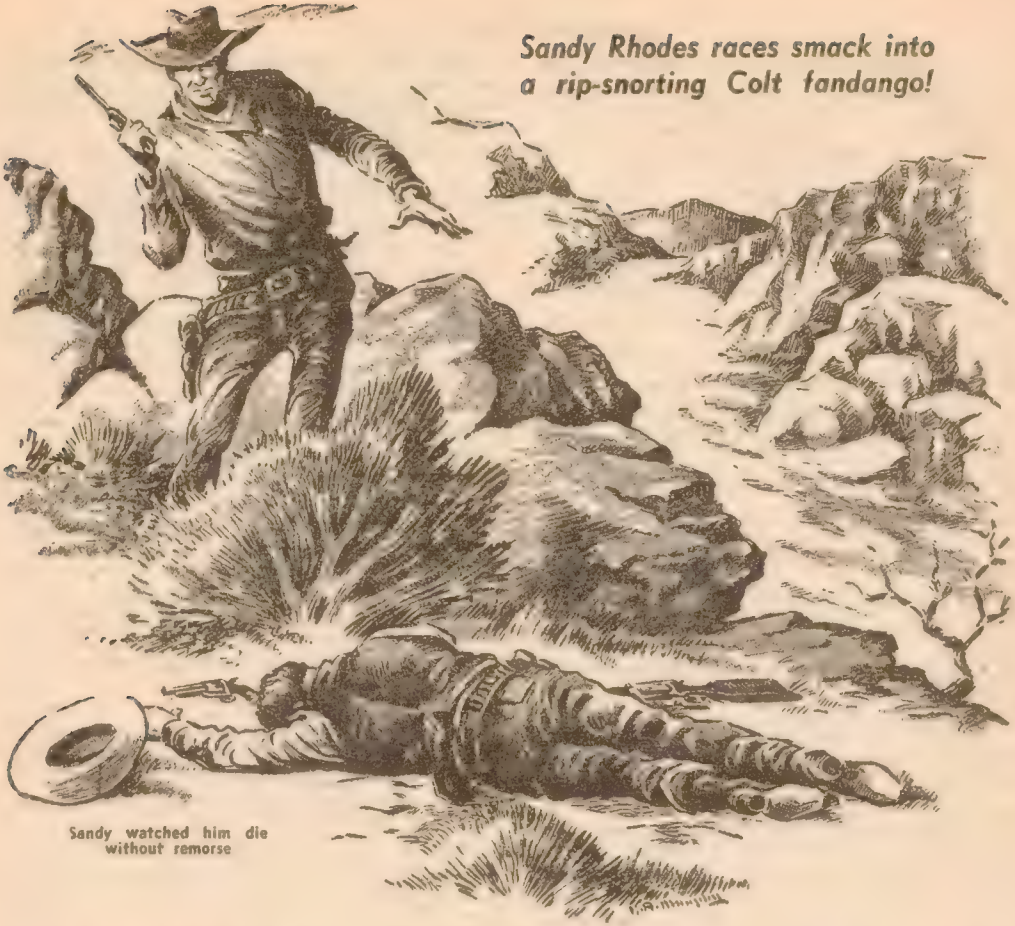
"Got something here that you'll be mighty interested in."

Bill Bibb came around the counter briskly, all set to sing the praises of his stock of Whaley Everlasting Honeycombs.

Whopper hurriedly stuffed thirty-three dollar bills in a front levis pocket, winked at Swap and jerked a head motion toward the door.

Then he put his long legs in motion and they hit leather on the run and reined southward with their punchboard winnings.

Sandy Rhodes races smack into a rip-snorting Colt fandango!



Sandy watched him die without remorse

THERE'S GOLD IN THEM THAR HOSSES

By GILES A. LUTZ

SANDY RHODES halted his blood bay stallion and looked back. The two mares were coming along with good spirit not needing driving or a lead rope. A soft, proud look was in Sandy's face.

"Ten miles or a hundred," he murmured. "It don't make any difference to them."

He wasn't a big man, but he gave the impression of unbridled power. His shoulders and chest were bigger than his stature called for. In a horse those would be the marks of staying power. It was the same in a man.

His clothes were worn and dusty, but he didn't look like the typical saddle tramp.

He eased the stallion into a shallow dry wash, bisecting a long gentle slope, then halted abruptly at a faint sound. He heard it again, the dry snapping cracks of gun fire. Sweeping the barren landscape he finally picked up two black dots moving with painful slowness, making their way towards a bald cluster of rocks. He heard a single bark, saw the two dots halt, then two booming reports drifted up to him.

"Two gents got another one cornered," he said aloud. Two against one could mean black work. But it also could be a couple of lawmen trying to flush a desperate character.

"We might take a look-see," Sandy muttered.

The stallion picked up his gallop, the mares pounding after him. Sandy was half-way there when the two dots, now much larger, sprang to their feet and rushed away. They headed into the mesquite, and Sandy saw horses tethered there. He hadn't noticed them before, for it took motion to pick out objects at that distance. The men mounted and pounded away towards the west.

A third figure stood up among the boulders. As Sandy swung his stallion along side, the man was shaking his fists and swearing.

The oldster was so mad it was funny. Sandy hid a grin.

"Trouble, partner?"

"Trouble," the old man shrieked. "Them dirty bushwhackers. They shot my pack hoss. They stole my dust. I was out of lead. They'd have downed me if you hadn't come up."

The old man sat down suddenly, as though all the strength were drained from his legs. His voice was dull.

"For four years I been lookin'. Then when I find me a pocket, they come along and clean me out."

HEARING this made Sandy uncomfortable. The oldster was a pathetic sight. Age had traced lines across his face like the wind marks patterns in desert sand. He had a heavy growth of white stubble, and a thin brown line of tobacco juice streaked a corner of his mouth.

"I figured I had enough to live easy for awhile."

"Let's get moving," Sandy said. "We can pick them up."

"Not them," the old man mourned. "They're ridin' hosses."

"What do you think these are?" Sandy snapped.

Sandy's tone brought the old man's head erect. A spark of interest flickered in his eyes.

"That's a new hoss to me. What is it?"

Sandy forgot the old man's troubles. He always did when he got a chance to talk about these horses.

"Arabian. Pure blooded. My Dad gave them to me. He had a dream. He wanted to see this kind of horse all over the West. He didn't get to stay around for his dream. I aim to pick it up. I got this stallion and two mares. When I show people what Arabians can do over ordinary horses it'll amaze folks."

"Those fellers weren't ridin' ordinary hosses, or my name ain't Gabe Martin," the oldster said stubbornly. "I know the hosses, even if I don't know the riders. Those were Jonas Bent's thoroughbreds."

Sandy's eyes gleamed. "Thoroughbreds. Good for a lot of speed for a short lick. An Arabian can go further, faster on less feed and water than any other horse alive. Shucks, Gabe, these horses came out of the worst desert in the world. Jonas Bent. What kind of a gent is he?"

Gabe's language was bitter. "He's tied up everything in Hungry Valley. He takes in every outlaw who comes along. Those two who took my dust will be turnin' over part of it to Jonas."

"Why don't the sheriff act, then?"

"He's nothin' but a weak-kneed old man." Gabe snorted his contempt. "The sheriff's afraid to buck Jonas. Afraid of losin' his tin."

"We're ridin' to Hungry Valley, Gabe. I never saw one individual bigger than a town."

Gabe climbed on one of the mares.

"She's got manners," he said. "No fuss at all."

Sandy's thoughts were occupied. "How far to town?"

"Upwards of thirty miles."

"Four hours. We'll be in time for supper."

"You plannin' on runnin' the whole way? I said thirty miles!"

"An Arabian's natural gait is a gallop. He's been trained to it for centuries."

Gabe shook his head. Well the horses weren't his. The look on Gabe's face changed as hour after hour slipped by and Sandy's horses showed no signs of faltering. Only an occasional walk up hill broke the rhythm of their gallop.

Gabe pulled along side the stallion.

"Danged if I don't believe they can do it," he yelled. "What do yuh call them?"

"This is Kamil. The two mares are Guemera and Leila." Sandy grinned. "Arabian names. Kamil means 'the perfect'. The mares are 'the moon' and 'the night'. My dad named them."

Sandy quit talking. A plan was building in his mind—a plan where he could show the people of Hungry Valley something new in horses and maybe restake Gabe. They pulled over a long rise, and the town lay before them.

It was a drab little town, a few unpainted buildings lining the one dusty street.

They halted the horses.

"It could look like more," Gabe explained. "The good people stay away because of Bent." He squinted at the sun. "Just a leetle over four hours, and they got something left. Maybe yuh got something."

"Is Jonas pretty proud of his thoroughbreds?"

Gabe wagged his head. "Nothing has beat them yet. Yuh got a idea?"

"We eat first, then we look things over."

They swept down the one street at a gallop, and dust swirled from hoofs and blanketed spectators and buildings alike.

ABRUPTLY Sandy stopped and dismounted before a sad-looking restaurant. "Think we were seen?"

Gabe looked at the slowly settling dust. Nearby two punchers were swearing.

"Yep, we were seen. Jonas Bent was out in front of his saloon. We dusted him up considerably. He won't be likin' that."

Sandy beat alkali from his clothes. "Maybe he'll come lookin' us up."

Sandy had called it right. He wasn't half through his meal when a harsh voice spoke to him.

"I want to talk to you."

Gabe stopped his wolfing. Sandy put careless eyes on the speaker and the two men just behind him. He turned back to his food.

"Talk up," he invited.

"I'm Jonas Bent." Bent waited, then flushed as Sandy continued eating.

One of the men growled and stepped forward.

"Hold it," Bent commanded. "Young man, I said I wanted to talk to you."

Sandy turned slowly. His eyes showed nothing as he took in Bent, from his immaculate Stetson to the toes of his highly polished boots. Bent was dressed in a suit of finest broadcloth. He wore his black hair long, like an Indian scout, and his mustache was full and sweeping. His glittering eyes prevented him from being mistaken for a dude. They were small and venomous. Bent was a high-handed man, used to people scraping before him.

"I don't like the way you come hoorahin' down Main Street, stranger."

Sandy's voice was careless. "When you got good horses you show them. I got horses that ain't been beaten."

Bent's eyes gleamed. "You lookin' for a match?"

"I got two hundred that says Kamil beats anything you got at two miles."

"Tomorrow morning. It's a match." Bent turned at the door. "You're goin' to learn a lesson, friend. It'll be a costly one."

When the door closed Gabe spoke. "That was fine. Yuh riled Bent and lose yore money."

"Who were the two hombres with Bent?"

"Ace Bailey and Slick Hoskins," Gabe growled. "Them two gunmen are always follerin' Bent."

Gabe wasn't hungry any more. Sandy paid for the meals. "We got to feed the horses and get some rest, Gabe."

Gabe trudged along at his side. "How come yuh made that fool play? Yuh figure Kamil can beat Bent?"

Sandy smiled. "Not at two miles."

Gabe gave up in disgust. Sandy heard him still grumbling as he slipped into his blankets.

Sandy was gone when Gabe woke in the morning. Gabe found him going over Kamil's gear.

"There's a big crowd already," Sandy said. "Jonas is waitin'."

They led Kamil towards the outskirts of town. Bent was there, his face stamped with impatience.

"The sheriff will hold the money," he said.

Sandy pulled bills from his pocket.

"Howdy, sheriff," he said. The sheriff was an old man. His eyes had a weary, beaten look, his shoulders drooped. His voice was flat.

"I'll start this race," he said. "That tall knob yonder is a mile. There and back."

Sandy walked Kamil to the starting line. Bent's thoroughbred was a black, full of life and fire. He snorted and danced with little mincing steps. Bent sat him well. Sandy nodded. Bent was a horseman.

Sandy heard the comments rising from the crowd.

"Just look at him. Bent got that horse clear from Kentucky. Other hosses ain't got a chance against him."

Kamil suffered by comparison. He had a short-coupled compactness beside the thoroughbred's long sleekness. Bent's horse was longer of leg and back.

"Start when I drop my hat," the sheriff said.

Bent beat Sandy away. For a quarter mile Kamil stayed within striking distance. Then he dropped behind. At the knob Bent was a long ways in front. He stayed there for the entire distance.

BENT was waiting when Sandy pulled Kamil to a stop. His thin lips had creased into a wolfish grin.

"Expensive talk, wasn't it, friend?" He collected his money, and the crowd left with him. Only the sheriff and Gabe remained.

"A foolish bet," the sheriff drawled. "Jonas is a tough man to beat."

"Jonas rides a high horse." Sandy's eyes studied the sheriff's face. "When he falls he'll drag people with him."

The beaten look was on the sheriff's face as he turned away. Gabe looked after him.

"I knew Ed Clovis once when he was different. Jonas could never have kept a loop on him then. Yuh lost yore money. What do we do now?"

"Look at Kamil."

"He ain't very tired. Could keep goin' all day. Shucks, I seen him do it yesterday. But

that didn't beat Bent's hoss."

Sandy hunkered down and drew pictures in the sand. He talked, and Gabe's eyes shone.

"By dang, yuh just might. When yuh settin' it up?"

"Tonight. We'll get enough to give you another stake."

Youth came back into Gabe's face. "It won't take me so long this time, boy. Maybe we'll put yore daddy's hosses all over this country.

They camped outside town and spent a quiet day. It was dark when they headed for the main street.

"Where can we find him, Gabe?"

"Probably the Tomahawk. He owns it."

Sandy staggered as he pushed the batwings aside. Gabe hid a grin. For a man who hadn't a drink it wasn't a bad stagger.

Bent stood against the bar, surrounded by a dozen men.

"They never learn, eh boys? Have another one on the stranger."

Sandy's voice was loud. "That was just once, Bent. I got more money. I got more that says Kamil can beat your horse."

"The blasted fool's back, boss," Slick Hoskins said.

Bent's eyes were contemptuous. Sandy didn't look as if he had money. The bottle was talking.

Sandy grabbed at Bent's arm.

"I got a thousand dollars," he said thickly. That was all he had, and it represented struggle and work. He shook off the doubt. He knew his horse.

"Well now—that's different," Bent said.

The curious crowded nearer. Sandy and Bent were the center of interested eyes.

"I'll make the conditions."

Bent humored him. "Sure, sure. You make them."

"Three hundred miles," Sandy said. "To be done in five days." He laid a piece of paper on the bar. "Here's four towns, each about sixty miles apart. Back to Hungry Valley makes the fifth lap. If a horse is two hours late getting into the first town, then that horse doesn't start the next morning until two hours after the other one's left. The one getting here first on the last day takes it all."

Bent's face went a little white.

"Three hundred miles?" he faltered.

"You afraid for your thoroughbred?"

"Take him, boss," Slick yelled. "That's a thousand waitin' to be picked up."

Bent licked his lips. "When do we start?"

"Two weeks from today. And we put the money up now with the sheriff." Sandy turned to Clovis. "You heard it. I'd be obliged if you'd arrange for the sheriffs at Dry Springs, Gunsight, Wild Rock, and Mica to check us in each evening and start us out each morning."

A new light shone in Ed Clovis' eyes.

"I'll arrange it." He took the bills Sandy handed him and turned to Bent.

"I'll have to get it from the safe," Bent said huskily.

He walked away like a man in a daze. It was a new idea, a powerful big one, and he hadn't quite absorbed it yet. He had been called in front of this crowd, and there was no backing down.

He came back and handed the money to Clovis.

"Do you want more?" Sandy asked. "I might get my hands on a few dollars."

The muscles throbbed along Bent's jaw.

"I'll handle all you get." He could make out no details, but the vague outlines of what he saw looked scary.

Sandy slapped Gabe on the shoulder. "Let's go, old-timer."

OUTSIDE Gabe chortled. "Yuh hooked him right. Yuh got him."

"Yep." Sandy's voice was dry. "Now all we got to do is beat him."

"What do I do, Sandy?"

"Kamil will need some work. You can take him out for ten or twelve miles each day. I'm goin' to be busy."

In the next week Sandy visited a lot of people. All he had was an idea and his voice, and it wasn't enough in most places. He found a listener in Silas Olsen's Running W spread.

"I know something about Arabians," Silas said. "You might do it. If Jonas Bent could be broken, it might run him out of this valley. I been wantin' that for a good many years. Son, I'm goin' to string along with you. I got three thousand salted away I can afford to play with. Maybe some of my boys would like to go in."

Sandy rode away contented. That night he heard Bent had almost four thousand of Running W money to cover.

Olsen broke the way. The little bets began to come, fifty here, a hundred there. Sandy passed Bent on the street, and there was hatred in Bent's eyes.

Jonas was looking at ruin, and the picture wasn't good.

Gabe rode Kamil during the days. Each night he sat for hours and talked of nothing but the stallion.

"The durnest hoss I ever seen, Sandy. He's got more savvy than me. We go a direction just once and he knows every foot of it comin' back. Beats me how he gets it settled in his mind. Did yuh ever see him lookin' all around when he walks? Just like he's seein' everything to recall it when he passes it again."

Sandy chuckled. "They all do that, Gabe. He's goin' all right?"

"He's honin' to go. I ain't even seen him tired."

"Tomorrow will be the last trip, Gabe. We'll let him rest a few days after that."

He waved at Gabe as he rode off. Gabe should be back in time for supper. Sandy was going to grab himself a nap.

He woke up about five o'clock, looked at the sky and didn't like what he saw. Those clouds carried wind. He was still staring at the clouds when Clovis came up.

"I want to talk to you, Rhodes," Clovis said. "I want to talk, and I don't know where to begin."

The sheriff fiddled around.

"Why don't you just start?" Sandy suggested at last.

"What are you tryin' to do here?"

"Win a horse bet."

The sheriff shook his head. "It's more than that." His face suddenly had become pleading, as if he were asking for help.

"I'm tryin' to break Jonas Bent," Sandy said slowly. "If I take his money, he'll lose his power. It started with tryin' to recover some of Gabe's lost dust. At the same time I wanted to prove what Arabians can do. Look at the people around here. Everybody is sold on thoroughbreds because Bent wins a few short races. That's not the horse for the West. He needs more than a little speed."

He ducked his head as wind-driven sand bit at his face, and cast an anxious look at the skies. Gabe should be getting back.

"It's bigger than that now," Sandy went on. "I want to get a town, a valley out from under a man's boot, to do a job the sheriff should have done." He fed this last to Clovis hard, like a punch straight from the shoulder.

Clovis winced. "I reckon you're right. I've closed my eyes to a lot of things these last years. I got an invalid wife. I needed this job for a couple more years. Then I'd have enough to sit on. With Bent's backin' I kept the job." He turned his back to the biting particles of sand. The rising wind tattered his words, making them difficult to understand. "Now it ain't so big. It ain't big at all. I got two thousand dollars, Rhodes. I'm goin' complete loco crazy. I'm bettin' with you that Jonas Bent gets broke out of town."

The wind was howling now.

"Jonas is scrapin' the barrel," Sandy yelled above its force. "That ought to do it." He squinted into the storm. The light was fast being blotted out, and the sand-filled wind raged about them. "I'm gettin' worried about Gabe. He should be back by now."

HE spent anxious minutes staring into the storm. His eyes reddened and his face smarted under the impact of the sand.

"I'm ridin' out after him," he said abruptly.

"Be right with you," Clovis said.

The sheriff rode up as Sandy finished saddling one of the mares.

"Gabe always rode this way," Sandy yelled. "If he changed today—"

He didn't finish it. If Gabe had taken another direction, they would never see him in this screaming, sand-filled air.

The horses plodded along with heads swung low. Sandy and Clovis kept their faces ducked into their chests. The force of the wind lashed at their hats until the chin strap cut deep into their flesh. They rode for an hour, a steady, torturous pace. Clovis pulled alongside.

"It don't look so good," he screamed.

Sandy agreed with him. It looked more than bad. Gabe had taken another route. Sandy was ready to turn back when a darker blob loomed against the little light left. He pressed the mare, and she responded. He was almost upon the vague shape before he recognized Kamil.

Sandy saw the other shape then. Gabe Martin lay on his stomach, his stiffened, clawed hands full of sand. It wasn't hard to reconstruct what had happened. With his last breath Gabe had been trying to pull himself along.

Sandy sat on his heels a long time looking at Gabe.

"He rode as far as he could. When he fell Kamil stopped. They shot Gabe through the back. There ain't any place to start lookin'. The storm's wiped everything out. I'd say he was shot a long time back."

He inspected Kamil and found a raw furrow across the quarters.

"They were gunnin' for the stallion," he said finally. "They got Gabe. The storm prevented them from followin' it up."

He swore then, a long, steady stream, his voice flat and passionless, but all the more deadly for the lack of emotion.

"Bent?" Clovis croaked.

"Bent." Sandy's face was thin and bloodless. "I named Kamil in the bet. If the stallion was out of the way, Bent figured on collectin'. Bent's scared, to try this. I'm goin' to break him, sheriff. I'm goin' to break him."

He lifted Gabe and laid him across Kamil's back. The stallion stood patiently.

"I could gun Bent now," said Sandy. "Yep, I sure could."

It was a slow hard trip back to town. They left Gabe at the undertakers.

"I'm sendin' two reliable men to stay with you until the race," Clovis said.

Sandy nodded. He needed sleep, and Kamil had to be watched every hour.

Gabe was buried the next day. Sandy ached inside as he turned away from the

grave. He had only known the old man a short time, but his going was none the easier for that. Gabe had believed in Sandy's dream. If Gabe hadn't, he would still be roaming his deserts.

The two men stayed close to Kamil. They ate and slept in relays, and at all times Kamil was amply guarded.

"Ed Clovis did some talkin' about the other night," one of the men told Sandy. "He didn't call names, but people are figurin'. They're guessin' rightly that Bent is scared. They're bettin' that way. It's said Bent won't have a dime if he loses. Watch yourself."

Sandy knew what he had to face. He went to sleep the night before the match, and his anger still burned like acid.

The morning of the race was clear, the heat of the sun already noticeable. All of the townspeople were at the starting point, and ranchers and punchers from as far as fifty miles away were there. The ones who favored Bent were clustered around his black thoroughbred. They made a sizeable crowd, but a larger crowd waited for Sandy and Kamil. This was the breaking point, and the decent element were seizing it.

"All arrangements are made," Clovis said. "The sheriff at Dry Springs is waitin' to time you tonight. The Hungry Valley banker's holding the money. It was too much for me to handle. I wish I could send someone along, Sandy. Bent's a worried man."

Sandy checked his saddle-bags. Kamil's feed for the day was in them. Sandy walked Kamil to Bent's black.

"It's eight o'clock," the sheriff said, and the crowd roared. Bent kicked his horse. He left fast. Sandy went off at a slower pace. Hard miles lay ahead. For a long time he could hear the yelling crowd. Bent stayed in front, not a great distance, but still in front. Sandy was content. This race called for endurance. Speed alone wouldn't be enough.

THE long hot miles fell behind them. For a time, Sandy stayed within view of Bent. But slowly Bent and his mount faded to a bobbing speck, then it was gone. Kamil ran smoothly. Sandy figured Bent beating him into Dry Springs.

The sun was flooding the Western horizon with its light when Sandy pulled into Dry Springs. A crowd waited in the middle of Main Street. Sandy halted and climbed stiffly from the saddle. A big, florid-faced man, wearing a shiny star, spoke to him.

"Bent got in over a hour ago."

"All right," said Sandy.

"That's a lot of time to make up," the sheriff continued. "People are kind of disappointed. They looked for you to be on Bent's heels at least."

Sandy grinned. "There's a lot of miles ahead. Can I get a deputy to watch Kamil tonight?"

The sheriff stared. "Like that, huh?"

Sandy's face was sober as he nodded.

The night was uneventful. It was ten minutes after nine in the morning when Sandy got the sheriff's nod. Bent was long gone. The day was a repetition of the first. Hot miles flowing smoothly backward. At noon Sandy halted and opened the saddle-bags for Kamil's feed. He stared, then his face creased in a hard grin. He had been careless. Last night he had filled and buckled those bags and hadn't checked them this morning. Kamil didn't have any feed. The bags contained sand.

"Bent is mighty afraid," he said softly. "He made that switch or got someone to do it. He doesn't know you've gone longer than a day on what you could rustle." He turned Kamil loose, and the stallion lipped contentedly at the sparse green vegetation.

The red rim of the sun was disappearing when Sandy halted in Gunsight.

"You're two hours behind Bent," the sheriff grumbled. "People here ain't happy."

Those would be the ones who had bet with Sandy. He made no comment. He turned Kamil over to one of the sheriff's deputies and filled his own empty middle. As he walked out of the restaurant he passed Bent. Bent didn't speak. He looked strained and drawn. Sandy didn't mention the sand filled saddle-bags. He doubted Bent would try that again. If he did, it wouldn't work.

It was ten the following morning before Sandy left Gunsight. He saw Bent leave at eight, and Bent's thoroughbred looked a little stiff. Today, Kamil would pick up some of the lost time.

The day was uneventful. Kamil got his feed at noon and rolled into Wild Rock with the same, effortless pace.

"I figured I made up some time," Sandy said as he dismounted.

"A hour and twenty-five minutes behind," Wild Rock's sheriff said. "With two days left that's a big load."

Sandy grinned. "Bent's worryin', not me."

He walked past the livery stable, where Bent had his horse stabled, and Bent was frantically rubbing down the black.

Sandy bobbed his head. "Gettin' stiffer every day."

He looked Kamil over carefully in the morning and found nothing wrong. Kamil looked as fresh as though he had been resting a month. He kept nipping playfully at Sandy's hat.

"You got to be serious, Horse," Sandy admonished him. "You don't know how much you're carryin'."

Probably it was a good thing. It made Sandy shake to think of it. He could imagine how Bent was feeling.

He got his start from Wild Rock's sheriff and rolled on his way. His eyes kept sweeping the horizon, but he could see no one. He had a funny feeling, of a storm or something threatening. Bent wouldn't take being pushed lying down.

It was after noon when Sandy reached a water hole where he intended stopping. Bent should be about a hour ahead. Sandy could afford to give Kamil a drink, then rest a little. As he climbed out of the saddle, he saw something lying on the far side of the hole.

He led Kamil over and saw a dead coyote. He reached down, felt the critter, and there was still body heat left. He walked over to the water, scooped up a handful and sniffed. He got an acrid smell. He touched his tongue to it, and the water was bitter. His eyes were slitted as he straightened up.

AT Wild Rock the sheriff told him this morning that this water was drinkable. It wasn't now, not after Bent had passed. Sandy felt a little sick. If that coyote hadn't drunk just before Kamil came up, Kamil's muzzle would be in that water. Bent was using everything he could think of, now.

Sandy gave Kamil the water in his canteen, and it was enough. He halted in Mica.

"You're thirty minutes behind," the sheriff said.

Sandy didn't like the looks of this man. His eyes shifted when someone looked at him square.

"All my deputies are out," the sheriff said, when Sandy requested a guard. "You got to watch your own horse."

Sandy stared at him for a long moment, then led Kamil away. That thirty minutes gave Bent a little time to pick some cards from the deck. Sandy tried Mica's two livery stables, and they were full. Sandy looked at the empty stalls and didn't comment. He found an old barn at the town's outskirts and bedded Kamil there. It looked like a sleepless night for Sandy. It was almost midnight when Sandy had an idea.

"We're movin', boy," he said. "It don't smell healthy here."

He led Kamil quietly out of the barn and looked cautiously around but couldn't see a thing.

"Maybe I'm a fool," he muttered.

He took Kamil a mile out into the waste and settled down. A hour later he saw a vivid glow in the direction of the barn he had left. The wind carried faint cries to him. The fire had aroused the town.

Sandy rolled over. "Looks like someone was chilly, Kamil. They started a fire. They might even have used an old barn."

He got a couple of hours sleep in fitful catnaps. He was tired in the morning when he rode past the burned building. Someone had done a good job. It might have been hard for a man to get a horse out, or even to get himself out.

He was at the starting point at eight thirty, and the sheriff's eyes bugged.

"I thought, I—"

Sandy's eyes drilled into him.

"What did you think, sheriff?" He saw the same surprise on the faces of the crowd. He didn't figure they were in on it, they'd just been told a story. "Some day, sheriff, I'm ridin' back this way to have a talk with you," said Sandy.

Kamil picked up his easy gallop. This was the last day. Sandy would be glad when it was over. He was tired and sore, and the strain was beginning to tell.

At ten thirty he saw a dot bobbing far ahead of him.

"It's Bent," he said aloud. "I didn't think we'd catch him until this afternoon."

He gave Kamil a little rein, and the stallion responded. In a hour's time he was along side of Bent's black.

Bent's face was a grotesque mask. The thoroughbred was favoring the off fore-leg, and Bent kept urging him on.

"You're goin' to ruin that horse," Sandy yelled.

Bent swore, and his words were a wild, terrible thing. He quirted the black, and the horse put on a little more stumbling speed. He kept up for a short distance, then dropped steadily behind.

Sandy kept turning in the saddle, watching Bent. As he drew out of gunshot range he relaxed. It was just a long, lonesome ride from here on into Hungry Valley.

Ten miles out of town the road bent and twisted a torturous course through low-lying hills. Kamil started through the passage, then stopped and snorted. Sandy urged him on, and the stallion refused. Sandy slipped down, led Kamil off the road and tethered him among a bunch of live oaks. He walked away, looked back, and Kamil was well hidden.

"Somethin's botherin' him," Sandy muttered. He climbed to the top of the rocks bordering the road and made a painful way across them. He was losing valuable time, but Kamil had said something was up there. He turned each crook cautiously and was almost out where the road straightened again. He saw a movement in the rocks below him and stiffened.

He took it slow until he was directly behind those rocks. Then he stood up, not fifteen feet from Slick Hoskins. Slick was stretched out there, peering over the muzzle of his rifle.

"Lookin' for someone, Slick?" Sandy asked softly.

SLICK sprang up and whirled. A hoarse ejaculation died on his lips as he saw Sandy. "Drop it, drop it," Sandy warned.

Slick let the rifle slip from his hands, then slowly hoisted them skyward.

"If Bent came through first, you wouldn't have had any job. You got Gabe here." Sandy saw the fear spring into Slick's eyes, and the anger burned in Sandy's throat. "Kamil remembered this spot. You should've changed it."

He tucked his gun back into its holster. "I'm a chump for giving you a chance, Slick. Get!"

Slick's hand dipped. It wasn't even close. Sandy had the memory of a happy old man before his eyes. His slug caught Slick between the eyes, and Sandy watched him sprawl, die without remorse. Slick and his kind could be put in the same class as coyotes and other varmints.

Sandy walked back down the road and untied Kamil. With Sandy leading him the stallion was content to go through the rocky walls. He snorted a little as he caught the scent of freshly spilled blood, then they were out in the open.

It was a simple easy canter on into Hungry Valley. A huge crowd waited at the end of Main Street. They recognized Sandy and Kamil when they were still a good way out, and their yelling filled the air. Men fired guns, threw their hats up, lost them and didn't care. They kept up the din long after Sandy climbed lamely out of the saddle.

Ed Clovis moved forward, his old eyes shining. The beaten look was gone.

"You did it, son. You broke Jonas Bent out of town."

A little knot of men gathered sullenly off to one side. Those were the ones who believed in Bent's imported horse. Sandy looked them over with a cold eye.

"How many of them will back Bent when it comes to gun play?"

Clovis' eyes widened. "Ace and maybe a couple of others. The rest won't go that far."

Swiftly Sandy spoke of his meeting with Slick. "I'm waitin' here for Bent. I'll give him what he didn't give Gabe—a fair, even chance."

The clock crawled around until three hours had passed. Then far in the distance a dot was seen. It came nearer, and they could see Bent on a staggering horse.

"You beat him by over three hours," Clovis said. "Now all we do is collect our money from the banker."

Sandy didn't reply. He watched Bent dismount with stony eyes. The little sullen crowd gathered around the beaten man.

Sandy's hands felt the fit of his belt.

"It's here," he said through stiff lips.

He walked towards the little group on steady, slow legs. Bent stood there, reviling his horse with filthy names. A good, game horse had given all it had, and Bent had nothing but this kind of talk for it.

Thirty feet away Sandy halted. Ed Clovis was at his side. "I'm buyin' chips," Clovis said. "It's time I played a hand."

The little crowd read Sandy's face and scattered. Only Ace and another man remained with Bent.

"I'm takin' Bent," Sandy said in an aside. He raised his voice, and the words carried the length of Main Street. "I found Slick waitin' for me. Before he died he said you sent him out there. He was layin' for me like he did Gabe."

Bent's face turned a pasty white. His eyes were wild, fixed on Sandy's face in a hypnotic stare. Ace swore. The truth was there, in Bent's face, in Ace's words.

"Any time, Bent," Sandy said softly.

Bent broke his trance. His hands moved with desperate speed. His guns were swinging up when Sandy's slug caught him above the belt buckle. Bent fought to retain his feet with an animal-like vitality. Clovis' guns boomed at Sandy's side. The man at Bent's left fell, coughing with strangled grunts.

Bent struggled to swing his guns up. Sandy fired again, and Bent doubled under the impact.

ACE'S guns were booming, and Sandy heard Clovis' harsh sob. Sandy couldn't look around. He knew Clovis was hit, hit hard.

Ace laced a shot across Sandy's cheek. Ace was the toughest gunman of the bunch. Sandy, in his anger, had wanted Bent so badly he had almost ignored Ace.

Clovis' legs went rubbery, and he fell, knocking Sandy to one side. The impact saved Sandy's life.

Ace's bullet burned a furrow across Sandy's left arm. He would have taken that one in the chest. He threw down, and the shot caught Ace in the mouth. Ace's slug nicked Sandy's boot. Ace's scream was strangled by the rush of blood. He fell, clutching dust.

Shock hit Sandy like a physical blow. He staggered and almost went down. He caught himself and turned towards Clovis. Bent, Ace, and the other one were beyond causing any more trouble.

Clovis sat up, clutching his left shoulder.

"Now, now—I'm all right," he said. "I got my right hand to collect my money." His voice rose, for Ed Clovis had been freed of his bondage. "Son, can I buy a partnership with you?" His eyes looked back fondly at Kamil. "Thar's gold in them thar hosses."

"Men, my name is Anson," he said. "No living man can say I took part in the Lincoln County War."

SHADOW OF BILLY THE KID

By BARRY SCOBEE

Tagged as an outlaw and warned to move on, Eeger Anson stays on in Texas to prove his worth!

ANSON rode steadily eastward, grimly glad to be leaving the miles behind and equally glad to see new country ahead.

Toward mid-forenoon his ever-roving glance picked up an object in the rolling country of the long land that was the New Mexico-Texas border. He could not immediately identify the thing. Nor could his saddle horse or his packhorse, with their interestedly pointing ears.

Approaching the object after a time he saw that it was a board nailed to a stake driven solidly into the ground, as if whoever had put it there had been a positive character. On the board's west side were roughly-formed letters in black, N.M. On its east side was the one word, TEXAS.

So this was the state line!

A load seemed to lift from Anson's shoulders, though there was nothing but the board out here in the middle of nowhere—no wire fence or posts, or rocks or anything so far as his gaze could reach north and south over the grassy rangeland, to mark the line more definitely. Nor so far as he could see was

there a living, moving thing, save watching antelopes here and there.

Yet as Anson rode on he felt that a gate had closed behind him, shutting out the past, letting him into a happier future.

As he rode along in a freer mood he began to like the country, in the way a man takes a shine to a horse, or a gun. Later, when cottonwood trees in their yellow-green autumn dress marched over the horizon, and then a snug little settlement appeared, he felt the lift of a man arriving home after a long absence, though he had never seen the place before nor known of its existence.

As he arrived he made out a few small houses of lumber and adobe, a store, saloon, blacksmith shop, a tiny school, a wagon and feed yard, and a structure that bore a sign, CAFE. The word puzzled him. That was not the way to spell calf. Also why should a restaurant, as he saw it was, be called calf anyhow?

He reined into the feedyard. Two covered wagons loomed against the clear blue sky. In reply to a query, a man told him that the boss of the yard was in the "Caf". Anson left his horse and turned to the restaurant. A fat young fellow, with an untanned, baby-clear complexion and a floursack apron, came out suddenly without any sign of welcome on his face.

"Howdy," Anson greeted. "How about putting up my horse? And dinner?"

"You rode in from the west," the youth said. "You happenstance to be from Lincoln County, New Mexico?"

Anson's elation dropped. So this was a question they asked over here in Texas. Other men were coming swiftly—a big, booted, Texas-hatted man from the saloon, a lean quick fellow and two or three others from the store. Even the blacksmith, with smudged, pendulum fists, hurried up. Anson did not wish to lie to this town any more than to a woman he liked.

"Yes, I'm from Lincoln County," he said.

"Can't accommodate yuh," the young fellow said, with a shrug of dismissal. "Get yore horses and ride on."

"That's right, stranger," spoke up the big man from the saloon. "Sorry, but we don't want anybody from Billy the Kid country." He jabbed a thumb eastwardly. "That's the trail you're taking, if so it happens you're hightailing away from New Mexico."

SLOWLY Anson scanned the faces around him in shocked uncertainty. There were eight or nine, now. Their eyes were flat, curtained, forbidding. His own became slitted and stubborn.

"Men," he said, "my name is Anson. No living man can say I took sides in the Lincoln County war."

"Anson, uh?" the brawny blacksmith rumbled. "Eeger Anson?"

"That's right, Eeger Anson."

"So yuh took no side in the war, huh? That ain't what I heard. Yuh're a liar, Anson."

"That settles it, mister," the smooth-shaven, hearty big man from the saloon cut in. "Ride!"

The autumn breeze was cool and sweet against Anson's face. The aroma of cooking in the restaurant was in his nostrils. A gurgle of water coming from the cottonwood grove was a song of peace. But the faces of the men around him were honest and tight and forbidding.

"You goin' to ride?" the blacksmith shouted.

"Not till I speak my piece," Anson drawled. "No matter what anybody says, I took no sides in the Lincoln County troubles."

"That's a lie!" the blacksmith repeated truculently.

"I came down here from Kansas six or seven years ago looking for new land or a new town to settle in," Anson went on steadily. "I hit the Pecos river and its borderings. New Mexico was a good country. It'll be good again when the shadow of Billy the Kid and other things I don't need to mention fades out. I was no cowman but it fell so that I got me a few head of cows and built me up a little herd. I'd go to Lincoln now and then, about taxes or brands or such like, but I never got much acquainted around there. I've never been to Fort Stanton—er, Fort Sumner—where I hear an officer named Pat Garrett killed Billy the Kid back in the summer.

"In the last year, since the war as you call it, there have been other troubles. Men riding over the country asking what side a man was on. Making accusations, leaving threats, stealing cattle. Shooting a man out of his saddle now and then. The country was made into a dark land. A man would have to lay out sometimes at night, away from his own house. Even an innocent man, who never fired a shot or opened his mouth in the war, was forced to do that."

Anson sighed, then went on.

"I'm a peaceful man. I got tired of it—tired of living off by myself, always packing my guns, always on guard, suspicious of every man that rode into sight. I'm a town man by nature. Come a chance last week, I sold my cattle and hit for new country that maybe might be peaceful and half-way safe."

"You've said it, Anson, safe," the saloon man said. "We don't like to get rough. We like for a man to know why we drift him on, so's he can pass along the word. Four of us are from Lincoln County. We knew each

other back there and know we didn't have any part in the war. We drifted together here at the spring by chance. We have started this settle-mint. It's ours. We set a rule to let nobody from Lincoln County stop here with the shadder of Billy the Kid, and other troubles back there, riding with him. A few others, from eastward, have happened along here and stayed."

He paused and looked at Anson.

"The law is creeping West," the saloon man continued. "Some day it'll get to us and we'll have a courthouse and a sheriff, a justice of the peace and a jail, a post-office and a churchhouse and a preacher. It's the American way—we already got a school. We're peaceable and we aim to keep on being peaceable, and we don't want the shadder of Billy the Kid and other Lincoln County and Pecos River troubles clouding us. So you're riding on, Anson. It's only sixty miles or such like to the next Texas town. Just follow your nose along that trail."

"Men—" Anson began.

"No use argufying!"

"I'll say another word. I ate my last bacon and flour for supper yesterday. I don't think you'll drive me off on a sixty-mile jaunt, not if I was Billy the Kid himself, without selling me some supplies."

The men looked at one another. The lean man from the store asked a question at the big man from the saloon.

"How 'bout it, Harley?"

"Yep, Crate. Sell him a little stuff to carry him on his way."

Eeger Anson followed the merchant to his store. A comely woman was behind the counter.

"I'll wait on you," the storekeeper said, gruffly. At the back of the store, out of her hearing, he added, "I'm married. That woman ain't my wife. She's a Lincoln County widow woman. Her husband was killed in the war, though he didn't take no part."

The shadows are long and far, Anson thought.

As he left the store he passed her, and nodded gravely. She nodded in return, pleasantly. She was the most substantial and gracious woman he had ever seen, Anson told himself.

By the time he retrieved his horse and was tying a few articles in a gunnysack behind his saddle, the men had vanished from the street. Gone home to dinner, likely. It was high noon. The woman was leaving the store.

At the cottonwoods Anson saw the spring gurgling down from a rocky outcrop, with still, clear pools among the cattail reeds. His thirsty horse hawed into the water. It was the most pleasant place Anson had seen in years. The ground was carpeted with close-growing grass that was walked smooth by campers who had come and gone. The signs of their fires were all around. When the horses backed slobbering from the water, Anson got down and pulled off the saddle and the pack. The animals needed a rest. He got his sack of groceries, found sticks for a fire, and proceeded to prepare his dinner.

LONG after he had eaten, he sat whittling a twig and ruminating. The horses were standing droop-headed. What with rounding up his cattle and riding this far on his journey of hope, both the animals and the man were weary. Anson wished that he did not have to ride on. He lay back for a moment, clasping his hands under his head.

In the space of half a breath he heard human footsteps mingled with the uneasy shifting of his horses. He was wideawake in an instant—a habit he had acquired on the dangerous border. He had become as acute as an animal in this respect, and was up on his feet before the approaching men could speak.

A cowboy had a coil of rope in his left hand, a loop in his right.

"We told you to ride," said the big saloon man, who had been addressed as Harley. "You didn't do so."

"I tell yuh he's a Billy the Kid man!" the blacksmith rumbled savagely.

"Anson!" said Harley. "You've got just as long here as it'll take you to put your gear on your horses. Ride, and don't look back till you're out of sight."

Suddenly all the wrath that had been smouldering in Anson for the last year or more glowed hot. It was a wrath caused by men stopping at his little cattle camp with harsh and prying questions, men looking at his cattle brands to see if any of his stuff was stolen, charging him with having been on one side or the other in the troubles, making threats, and worse. He shook his head slowly. He spoke three words.

"I'm not leaving!"

The cowboy's loop hissed and sailed like a thrown snake, to drop around Anson's shoulders. In a stride Big Harley knocked the stiff loop away.

"No lynching!" he ordered sternly. "We'll settle this by the law—the only law we've got. And we'll hang him by the same law, if we've got to hang him. Come on, Anson."

They went to Harley's saloon. More men gathered swiftly. Harley mounted to the porch.

"We've got no judge," he said to them and to Anson. "We've got no sheriff. We've got no district attorney. But we've got a jury."

His big hand indicated the gathered men, and himself. Involuntarily Anson's mind counted them. Twelve.

"The question before the jury is does he

go?" Harley said. "Do we hang him? Does he get his choice? Have you got anything to say, Eeger Anson, before we vote?"

"Certainly," said Anson. "I'm not a Billy the Kid man. Or anybody else's man. I took no side in the Lincoln County war. I never saw Billy the Kid, so far as I know of. I rode out of that dark land to get away from his shadow—away from the bad feelings the troubles have left, and the killings that are the aftermath. I've come hunting honest men and a peaceful place to live. I think you men are good men. I can see you're trying to build up a decent town here. It will be a town some day. I can help you build it. I'm a kind of jack-of-all-trades. I can fix a clock. I can repair firearms. I can half sole boots and shoes. I'm a jack-leg carpenter—"

"We sure need a saw-and-hammer man," a voice said.

"The only clock in town needs fixin'," said another.

"Can you solder pots and pans, mister? And mend saddles and harness?"

"I can," Anson replied. "But I would rather take contracts to build little houses for the people who'll be coming right along."

"Where's yore tools?" asked a skeptical voice.

"I've got the cash I sold my cattle for. It's enough to build me a shop here on the main street, with two or three rooms behind it to live in. If I could get to a good-sized town with a wagon I could bring out all the tools I need."

"You'll never stay here on my vote!" the blacksmith rumbled stubbornly.

"Aw, dry up, Hammer-and-Anvil," somebody admonished. "You don't own the whole town by your ownself. He says he's no Billy the Kid man!"

A gabble of talk started up, a touch of anger in it. It stopped reluctantly at "Big" Harley's raised hand and calm voice.

"Don't fuss, men. We can't afford it. Every man will have a chance to say his say without interruption. Then we'll vote, yea and nay."

"I'll go back to the spring and leave you free," said Anson, fairly.

Before he had gone half the two hundred yards to the trees it seemed that every man back there was arguing angrily, some of them shrill, some low and savage. Now, Big Harley appeared unable to check them.

"There's going to be trouble," thought Anson, "and I'm the cause of it."

He stopped and looked back. The woman of the store appeared in the doorway. Even at that distance she appeared to be level-headed and gracious. Without rhyme or reason Anson all at once wanted not to appear mean or guilty in her eyes. He knew there was but one thing to do, apparently, to keep this new town from falling apart. He walked back.

As he arrived before the saloon the quarreling died out in questioning frowns and stares at him.

"Men," he said, "I've seen too much trouble to stay here and cause more. Thanks to you all the same. I'm leaving now."

OUT of the startled silence a voice called as he turned away.

"Hey, wait, mister. You're needed here. We'll settle this some way."

"Without more argument!" Big Harley shouted. "I'll do what talking's needed from now on. Then we'll vote. But it's got to be unanimous, Anson. If any one man blackballs you, you can't stay."

"If any one man objects, I won't stay," said Anson. Hope was in him again despite that he had offered to go. Maybe the woman off there in the store door would understand. He spoke to all the men. "I'll go back to the trees. When you make your vote, wave to me to come back—I'll be watching—or make a shoving motion at me and I'll ride on, and no more said."

Big Harley's clear voice, laying down steady words to the men, followed Anson for a way, then gradually played out with the distance. Anson thought maybe Harley might be a friend, but at the same time he knew that the big man would be a friend to his fellow townsmen, too, and to the town. The big man was that kind—level-headed and fair.

Anson dipped up a drink from the spring. The sweetest, coolest, finest water he had ever drunk, he told himself.

He stood himself to watch for a sign from the crowd, a come-here wave, or a shoving-away motion.

Big Harley was still talking, evidently, because he was smacking a big fist into a big palm. Then that stopped, and he began to make pecking motions with a finger, at each man—taking the vote. The yeas and nays.

Now he was finished. But he did not wave. Nor did he make a shoving motion. Instead he turned away from the crowd, coming this way. Coming to express regrets in person, which would be a little kinder than just shoving a man off with a gesture.

As he approached a grin spread over in his have.

"Eeger Anson, the vote came up clear," he said. "You're elected. Get your stuff together and come to my house. I'm running a freight wagon. It'll be in tonight. You can drive it next trip, to Lubbock. Bring back windows and doors for your building, and what tools you'll need. While you're there you'd better hunt up some Mexicans that know how to make 'dobies, because

(Continued on page 75)

The outlaw's weapon barely cleared its holster when three slugs knocked him down

BURIED GLORY

By CORDWELL STAPLES

A button with the thirst for vengeance in his heart grows up to wreak strange retribution when showdown time comes!

SAWBUCK" Smith's young son was an ornery little cuss, freckled and tow-headed, with disconcerting blue eyes. Maybe he looked like his mother. He must have had one, but he didn't show it, though he was still young enough to wonder why Dad spent so much time with gun practice, after a day working a quartz pocket in the Sun Dance hills.

The regular evening ritual began with sow-belly and beans. Then Pancho, the lop-eared mongrel, licked the plates while the Kid watched Sawbuck place a forty-five cartridge on the back of his gnarled paw and extend his arm, full length and shoulder high.

What followed when that leathery hand tilted was sheer wizardry, no less. Before the shell hit the rough hewn puncheons, Sawbuck's gun was out, its thunder shaking

the cabin as it poured lead into the playing card nailed over the knot hole in the farther wall. The smoke clouds hadn't ceased shivering when the Kid yelled,

"You're slow, Pap. It hit the floor before you got to the second slug."

Sawbuck grinned as he removed the riddled card, scrutinized the knot hole.

"Ain't touched the edges yet, son," he said.

Then he stuffed in an old red bandanna to keep out the wind, and added the day's dust and nuggets to the slowly filling buckskin poke.

Smith was widely wanted, though not by the law. He had become famous in Arizona for proving that a cattle thief couldn't drop a running iron and reach for a gun quickly enough to alter the score. But being concerned about the Kid he had smoothed the notches from his sixes and turned prospector. He was through with gun slinging, and his evening practice was an epitaph to buried glory.

Finally, when the buckskin poke was full to the neck, he and the Kid went to Mesa Blanca, in eastern New Mexico. There he opened a store, and its crudely painted sign, GENERAL MERCHANDISE—TIMOTHY SMITH, PROP., was the best possible alias.

He still toted a well-oiled gun, and never turned his back to a window or doorway. That, however, was pure instinct. Living right in town, he quit his target practice. The Kid wondered, and got short answers, so he didn't ask why no one in Mesa Blanca addressed Pap as "Sawbuck."

"Kinda funny," he pondered, watching half a dozen cowpunchers come larruping down the dusty street and pull up in front of the Silver Palace Saloon, next door. "Back there in Sun Dance everybody called him Sawbuck. And now he won't never let nobody call him that. Not even me."

The Kid liked Mesa Blanca, in spite of the pesky school which he was now old enough to attend. But the term was short, and they couldn't always get schoolm'ams to put up with the town. So he had ample time to run errands for Pap, or sit in front of the store, wondering why in tarnation those reservation Indians didn't get bigger hosses, so their moccasined heels wouldn't durn near drag in the dust.

But what filled his eyes, one afternoon, distracting him from pelting pebbles at a horn toad, was the smooth-faced stranger who rode up on a blue roan with long legs and a hammer-head, and the eyes of a fiend. The Kid liked that horse. Pap could ride a beast like that, but not everybody. A man's mount and a man was forking him.

The Kid's frank admiration of that hawk-nosed young rider brought a responsive, amiable grin from the stranger.

"He sorta looks things over like Pap," the Kid told himself, noting that the stranger's eyes were like chips from an agate-ware dishpan. They scarcely shifted, yet saw everything.

THE dusty horseman stepped into the Silver Palace, after a wary, though hardly perceptible pause at the threshold. The Kid edged over to where he could look in through a window. He saw the lone rider stride over to the bar.

"Biggest drink in the house, and put centipedes in it!" the man boomed.

He was either a salty jasper or a blowhard, and the barkeep didn't particularly care which. But that brag made the Kid grin. Here was a real man—like Pap. The barkeep set out the rankest whiskey in Mesa Blanca, and wondered whether the lanky newcomer had won or just inherited the dozen odd notches on the bone handles of his sixes. The Kid noted that the guns were low hung, and tied down.

The drink hit bottom without touching the edges, but not even during that short interval did the man's glance completely leave the back bar mirror, which reflected the swinging doors and the five leading citizens who sat in a corner, playing poker. Something ancient and deadly peeped from his eyes, even when he gestured to the others.

"Crawl up and drink deep, gents," he invited. "I'm Single Shot Dawson."

That brought all five to their feet, including Lem Boggs, the marshal. Dawson's glory had spread magnificently, ever since he had downed the notorious "Locust" Wilder, down in Tombstone.

A gold piece thumped on the bar; then the thump of glasses set down, and the appreciative snorts that follow blistering liqour. A pleasant young chap, this Dawson, when he wasn't on the prod.

"If you're aimin' to be in Mesa Blanca couple days," began Lem Boggs, tactfully angling for information, "they's goin' to be a right smart of a fandango in town."

"I'd sure admire to stay and dance," acknowledged Dawson. "Only I'm just passin' through. Lookin' for a skunk named Smith. Heard he lit a shuck for these parts. Or mebbe for the Nations."

Boggs spat. "Smith covers quite a few folks," he observed judicially. "It darn nigh reminds me of that oratin' feller in the school books, sayin' yuh can't indict a nation."

Dawson grinned appreciatively, he was building a cigarette when the proprietor of the General Merchandise catfooted in, nodded, and cocked a boot on the rail. The

Kid spotted his father, and watched. Dawson instinctively mapped the storekeep and went on speaking to Boggs.

"The one I'm lookin' for," he said, "is a drygulchin' four-flusher that called hisself Sawbuck Smith."

The Kid bristled.

Sawbuck's face didn't change. That he tightened for an instant before deliberately reaching for his whiskey, escaped everyone. Yet Boggs felt a sudden tension. He laughed without reason, and said, by way of speeding the gunner on his way,

"Only Smith in Mesa Blanca is Tim, and all he does is sell chawin' tobacca and ten-penny nails. Tim, mebbe you heard of Single Shot Dawson?"

"Sure have," was the pleasant answer, and the eye to eye appraisal was too brief to be pointed.

"Seems to me I heard of this Sawbuck feller, in Arizony," offered Clay Wilkins. "They was bettin' he couldn't slap leather with Dal Finley, and two gents hadn't no more than just put up a couple of paper ten spots on it, when that gun-slingin' ranny tangled with Dal, right out in the street. And when the smoke cleared off, the gent that won the bet called his man 'Sawbuck,' and the name stuck."

"That ain't the way it happened." Dawson was quiet but positive. "He used to ride for the Circle-R, and he got ten bucks bounty every time he drygulched a rider tryin' to get back some of his own critters."

"Howsomever that may be," rumbled Lem Boggs, "ain't many'll try slappin' leather with Sawbuck Smith, if what I heard was true."

The swinging doors parted again, and the Kid came in. He approached his father.

"Pap, that ol' hootenanny, Jig Davis, wants them boots yuh ordered for him."

"All right, son. Be over in a minute."

This was somewhat to one side, just as Dawson snorted and said to Boggs,

"Drygulchin' ain't leather-slappin'. That Sawbuck Smith is a four-flushin' hired murderer, and—"

"Pap, yuh hear what that sculpin's callin' you?" demanded the Kid, indignation pointing his voice.

FOR a heart's beat, the silence screamed. Sawbuck could have passed it off as a kid's foolishness, resenting a slur at any Smith. But instinct commanded him. It was not merely a matter of keeping prestige with his son, nor with Mesa Blanca. It went deeper; a man's name is truly a part of himself.

"Git, you gol-danged brat!"

Sawbuck reached for his holster, and Dawson understood. The warning to the Kid had begun before Dawson's draw started. It was followed by the prolonged roar of two guns. The younger man's vest jerked as his second shot again extended the deadly bellowing. Sawbuck, drilled squarely by the last one, spun back against the wall. He collapsed before he could reach the bar. Concern for his son, imperiled by stray bullets, had cost him that merciless instant which could have won the exchange.

"Single shot, nothin'!" he sneered. "Took two! Sure, I'm Sawbuck Smith. . . ."

He made a futile effort to recapture the Colt that had dropped just beyond his reach. Dawson, both hands now filled, covered the group.

"Never mind that cut-down ten gauge," he warned the barkeep. "Steady, Marshal! He drew first!"

"Um. . . that's right," admitted Boggs. "And I could see yuh didn't know him when he come in. So that's Sawbuck Smith . . . Young feller, you inherited a lot of notches today."

Dawson half holstered his Colts, when a choked sob and a click startled him. He had lived only because his entire being could exclude all else and center on getting his gun into action. He had not yet realized just how the Kid fitted into this business.

The Kid had his father's fuming forty-five, had just wrestled the heavy hammer back to full cock. Two tears had cut white traces down his grimy cheeks, but his blue eyes were deadly. The gun blazed as Dawson lunged and the spectators ducked. A mirror shattered, and then the killer snatched the weapon.

"Son," he said, almost regretfully, "yore Pap was a better man than I ever 'lowed he was. When yuh get older, yuh'll be lookin' for me."

He laid the Colt on the bar and started out, clutching his wounded side and dazedly saying aloud,

"Looks like a gunslinger just can't quit, even if he tries to."

Hoofs clattered down the street. The marshal and the bartender debated as to who would take care of the Kid until he could run the store himself.

"Looks like it's my job," decided the newly arrived harness-maker and part-time funeral director, "bein' as how his dad turned a right smart passel of business to my perfession in his time. C'mon, Bub."

The Kid eyed Pap for a moment, then he tiptoed to the bar, took the big forty-five and trudged along. Now that he was a man with a purpose in life, he couldn't bawl right out in public. . . .

Mrs. Parsons, the wife of the undertaker-harness-maker, lent a hand, and with her

assistance, the general store somehow muddled along. Mesa Blanca, taking pride in the son of a great gunslinger, ran a prospective competitor out of town.

The Kid grew like a weed. He didn't have to learn to ride, since he'd always known how. But it was some time before his hand expanded enough to wrap around the butt of Sawbuck's ancient forty-five. Finally, when he was able to cock it with one hand, he closed up shop one afternoon and galloped well out of town, his shirt stuffed with cartridges and two tomato cans.

When he came back that evening, grimy and weary, his arm felt fairly yanked from its socket. He had learned that gunners are not entirely born. He grinned wryly, blinked away a tear and felt powerful ashamed, remembering he'd once said that Pap was getting slow.

This was more than vengeance. The Kid's face had become set from brooding over the knowledge that talking out of turn had fatally forced Sawbuck out of his incognito, and as he became older, and realized why the veteran gunslinger had retired, the memory of his slip cut more deeply. He had to have Dawson's scalp. He owed it to Pap, the better gunner of the two.

He didn't hate "Single Shot" Dawson; the man by rights was dead, and lived only by a fluke. That odd quirk made the Kid's gun practice cold and methodical. He was now taller than his father, and the crop of fuzz on his chin was encouraging. He was fast growing up.

One day, he drew and fired before the cartridge, spilled from his extended hand, hit the ground. Only one shot, but true. He couldn't sleep that night.

Later, he saw Hank Simmons, the postmaster, tacking up a notice: $1,000 reward for Single Shot Dawson, dead or alive. Even though the mail clerk had drawn first, this was once Single Shot could not claim self defense.

"Shucks," grumbled the Kid, suddenly weary. "With enough hombres trackin' him, he's goin' to get smoked out before I even have a chance."

HE COULD ride like a Comanche, and cut trail like one. He was now lean and wiry and long, iron to the grim heart of him. But he was wise enough to know that he could not yet double for Pap in a toe to toe shooting. So he waited. And each Thursday afternoon, when the old flat-bottomed press turned out the first copy of the Mesa Blanca *Scimitar-Tribune*, he was happy when he failed to find notice of Single Shot Dawson's death or capture.

He wheedled his guardian out of most of Sawbuck's money, paid Mrs. Parsons to tend shop and rode out into the hills. He was now using more forty-fives than he sold to the entire adjoining district. And one day he came back, nursing an ace of spades. It had two bullet holes through its center; gun drawn and fired twice while a cartridge dropped from shoulder height to the ground.

He tore down the reward notice. That way, probably no one in Mesa Blanca would recognize Single Shot if he ventured into town for bait or shells. But this precaution was wasted. A Federal marshal arrived and organized a posse to hunt the gunman. Single Shot had doubled in a vast loop, and now the once swaggering gunslinger had a remorseless pack on his shoulders. One mail clerk was hounding him.

"I'm goin'," the Kid announced, thrusting his way into the knot gathered about the marshal. The disconcerting intentness of his eyes made the men change their minds and accept him.

Days of hard riding, false leads, trails lost and regained, and the local posse turned back. But the Kid stuck with the U.S. Marshal when he went into the next jurisdiction. Once, while a new pursuit was organized, he followed a blind hunch to an adjoining town. There he met one of Single Shot's men who had ventured out of hiding to get food and ammunition.

It was a pretty piece of gun play. The outlaw's weapon barely cleared its holster when three slugs, close enough to make an ace of clubs pattern, knocked him down; dead before he dropped.

"Sort of runs in the family," muttered an old timer. "Sawbuck used to shoot like that."

But the Kid didn't carve his first notch.

Finally the posse trapped Single Shot in a cavern that bored into the face of an almost perpendicular cliff. The approach was over a vast field of black volcanic glass that cut like knives. Its barrenness offered no cover. Down the sandstone cliff trickled a thread of water which came from the outlaw's refuge.

Two, perhaps three pedigreed slayers raked the besiegers with deadly fire. The posse could commit suicide, trying to rush that impregnable retreat. It was a deadlock. But while food and cartridges could not last forever, desperate valor and the cunning of the doomed would lead to a murderous sortie, or perhaps a successful piece of Indian stealth.

All day, under the savage glare of the badlands, the sniping duel went on. The posse, raked and half blinded by bits of lava knocked into their faces by bullets, was at a standstill.

No surrender. Better die in action. And this, the marshal knew, would cost a dozen

good men, or else result in a last minute upset and a clear breakaway.

Finally, the Kid spoke up. "I got me a notion," he said eagerly. "If you can promise 'em they ain't goin' to get strung up to the first tree, mebbe they'll surrender."

The marshal snorted, and the sheriff spat. "Who'll talk to those trantlers?"

"I will. If I get killed, ain't really none of yore posse that's been wasted. I'm a right smart way from home and I got no folks. Now, I seen glasses shinin' up there. That's how they're snipin' us."

"What of that?"

"Well," explained the Kid, "when they see a harmless critter like me comin' up, they'll listen. But they'd shoot the gizzard out of a man."

He paused, smiling and guileless. He fooled the older heads, who admitted that the gangling and awkward-seeming lad might be right. The marshal shook his head somberly, then nodded. So the Kid wriggled out of a shirt that repeated washings had bleached to a dirty white, and turned it inside out.

"Don't cover me," he warned. "No matter what yuh hear, or I'll git it quicker."

With rifle grasped in both hands and held horizontally over his head, making the old Indian sign of peace, he deliberately rose from cover. The target was too easy to be tempting. Just as deliberately, he set the rifle aside, unfurled the shirt and advanced.

AUDACITY favored him, and the strain of siege made this insane advance a relaxation for the hard-pressed outlaws. It offered relief from wondering how long they could hold out. The Kid had shed his belt, and though they might suspect a Colt thrust into a hip pocket, it didn't matter. What was one young squirt against a bunch of hard-bitten slayers?

"What the tarnation yuh want?" challenged a voice from above.

Like deer responding to a fluttered handkerchief, curiosity led the speaker to expose himself for an instant. But no fire came from the lawmen's party.

"They sent me to make a palaver," the Kid answered. "There's a chance for you gents, if yuh want it."

A suspicious snort. Then, "You heeled?"

The Kid looked up, grinned amiably.

"Mister, I'm half undressed now. Yuh wouldn't expect me to come up here plumb naked! If yuh're afeared, I'll shuck the gun outa my hip pocket."

A laugh, harsh good nature responding to a moment's diversion from deadly strain.

"Anyway, you gents all got guns, ain't yuh?" the Kid continued.

[*Turn page*]

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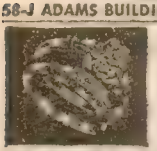

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"Tell him to come on up," rasped another voice, strained and brittle.

A muttering followed.

The Kid sensed the next risk— being used as a hostage, or a shield to cover the outlaws' escape. But that was part of this game. He scaled the difficult, dizzying face of the cliff. A burly, red-haired giant with a powder-blackened face thrust a rifle muzzle to his chest as the Kid hove in view. Another gunman was crouching behind a boulder.

The cavern was dark, in contrast to the outside glare. The Kid blinked.

"Which of you gents is the boss?" he asked. "Or are you pardners?"

His eyes had already accustomed themselves to the gloom, and he caught the glance that the two exchanged. He knew already that neither was the chief. From somewhere beyond the curve in the cavern wall, came a barely audible groan. The Kid pretended to ignore it, but his heart froze. Two men were between him and Single Shot Dawson.

"You kin talk with the both of us," said Red. "Eh, Larry?"

Larry agreed, so the Kid began.

"The sheriff's afeared to wipe out most of his posse, rushin' yuh," he said. "And it's pretty nigh election time, so he's got to make a showin'. Now, for an upstandin' peace officer, he can't have no necktie party, and so he's promisin' to have yuh turned over to the Federal marshal, to get yuh off his hands quick."

It was plausible. Red and Larry eyed each other. Red made as if to speak, stopped, and cocked an ear toward the rear of the cavern. A man was muttering, plumb out of his head.

"Bub," said Red. "We'll come out peaceable and bring Single Shot Dawson with us—providin' the law does right by us."

"Yuh mean it, mister?" The Kid's face was eager.

"Sure. Yore sheriff's good for his word, any time. Go back and ask him how about it."

The Kid started to turn, caught the quick move Red made as he brought his rifle into line. And then Red and Larry received a shock. Sawbuck's Smith's old siege gun had miraculously jumped into view and the Kid was advancing.

For two seconds, the half-gloom was a sulphurous hell laced by orange flame. The Kid's surprise party was half neutralized by the odds against him, but some of Pap's blinding gun speed helped him. He fired, shifting like a phantom as Larry went down, shocked numb and shirt aflame from the gun blaze. He felt the searing stab of Red's slug, just half an inch wide of knocking him end for end.

Then Red ceased firing. Larry went limp,

and the Kid pushed the corpse clear of the cavern mouth, rifle clattering after. That last would keep the alarmed posse from riddling the Kid when he appeared. They knew he did not have a Winchester with him.

He yelled, waved his white shirt. Then he appeared in the open. Field glasses flashed, the posse surged across the lava bed.

The Kid dashed back into the cavern. There he found Single Shot Dawson, delirious and tossing, calling him Larry. The Kid hesitated, then a nicely gauged tap with his pistol barrel served as an anesthetic. He hoped it hadn't injured the outlaw.

WITH silence assured for some moments, he went forward, hailed the posse. Then followed a cross-fire of questions. "Shucks," the Kid broke in, "I went up to get Single Shot, and what do I find but these here mavericks."

"So yuh got so sore yuh up and smoked 'em out?" drawled the sheriff.

"No suh. Yuh see, they got insultin', so . . . " He grinned impishly. "Anyhow, I got a confession out of Red Garner before he died. I mean, he just wanted to get somethin' off his chest, and he said, bein' as how he was about ready to leave this world, he oughta do the right thing for once."

"Yeah? What?"

"He killed that mail clerk," said the Kid. "Single Shot didn't."

"The devil! But where's Single Shot?"

"He cashed in, while back. Dunno as he'da told me, anyhow."

"Listen, Bub," the marshal cut in, "you sure?"

"Dyin' men can't think fast enough to lie," said the Kid. "It sorta hurts me, puttin' out a good word for Single Shot. But heck, 'tain't right lettin' a grudge do a dead man dirt."

"Hmmm. . . ." This was a chorus. Then from the sheriff, "Yuh gol-danged cuss, yuh went up lookin' for trouble, in the first place."

"Aw—well—sort of, Sheriff," the Kid admitted.

As the posse rode away, someone reminded the Kid that he had a couple notches to cut on his Dad's old gun, but he shook his head.

"I ain't like that," he grunted.

That night, he ostensibly set out for home. Actually, he went back to the lava beds. Single Shot Dawson was gone. The Kid found him, later, helpless and scarcely conscious. He fed and doctored him, then left him with grub, water, and a horse.

In a week, the outlaw could ride. And ride he did, not knowing who had befriended him. Just a freckle-faced button . . .

[*Turn page*]

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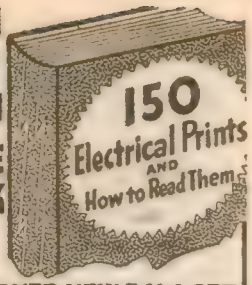

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Red's "confession" later helped Dawson. When an off-guard moment led him afoul of the law, down in Texas, his lawyer made the most of that inexplicable dying statement and the renegade was let off with five years in a Federal pen.

The Kid cursed lustily, and continued his target practice.

Those three shootings, however, left their mark. People eyed him when he passed. Once, now being man enough to stride up to the bar, he settled a blowhard. He tried not to kill the fellow, but he did. It was clear self-defense, and the "curly wolf" had been an unmitigated pest for some time.

That lengthened the Kid's face. He was getting a "rep," and he found he didn't like it. He realized that he was beginning to cat-foot, like Pap always had. And he already had begun to keep a solid wall to his back.

Finally, he sold out the store and left Mesa Blanca. But it was no use. His own identity, in places that had not kept up with the times, was being merged with Pap's. Flattering, but bad. He didn't want gun-fighting that might put an end to his purpose. Master gunners meet better ones. And die.

He changed his name and drove stage for a time. But defending a chest of bullion exposed his identity.

"Ain't no one else but Sawbuck's kid," was the verdict.

Single Shot Dawson, in the meantime, had gained a year for good behavior. The Kid did not know this until, in El Paso, he saw that hawk face, a bit pallid now, but those remorseless eyes were still gray-blue flakes of murder.

"Gosh," muttered the Kid, heart rising in his throat, "you can tell a mile off he's a gunslinger from where leather-slappin' was borned!"

Something other than vengeance gnawed at the Kid, and it was not fear. He knew, following Single Shot, that it was the unexpected realization of a need that had been growing for twelve years. Whether he killed Single Shot, or himself dropped, his work was done. Pap's old gun would have had a fair chance, with no loud-mouthed brat to delay its thunder.

Single Shot headed for the saloon. The kid was going to wait outside, but when he heard that unforgettable voice, he stalked in, compelled by more than himself.

"The biggest drink in the house," Single Shot boomed, "and drown some rattlesnakes in it. I'm Single Shot Dawson. Crawl up and drink deep, gents."

Hard-bitten El Paso was awed and apprehensive, and glad to see Single Shot in a good humor. No one noticed the Kid until he edged into the line-up at the bar.

"Mister Dawson," he said, "I'd sure admire to have a personal word with you, when these gents ain't takin' all yore time."

Single Shot's scrutiny and appraisal were dagger sharp, purely instinctive.

"If it's that important—"

"Well, I can't exactly say important, Mister Dawson," the Kid cut in apologetically. "Shucks, I'll wait."

But the youth's unspoken flattery intrigued the outlaw. People hadn't forgotten the greatest gunman in the southwest. He gestured to the right, away from the others along the deep bar. No one edged along; it was more than courtesy that prevented them from being too curious.

MISTER DAWSON," began the Kid, his hands in plain sight on the bar, "I been waitin' for some time to tell you I was mighty proud yuh made use of that hoss and vittles I left, that time Red and Larry was taken. That buckskin with the blaze face and white left foreleg."

"Heck, I been waitin' to thank someone!" Dawson exclaimed. "I was too loco to notice things that night. It sure was a buckskin with a blaze face. And I'm right proud to be able to thank you."

He didn't ask the name of the boy who had befriended him. But the Kid read the query. His hands were still bar-high and limp when he smiled.

"Shucks, it warn't nothin'," he said. "But I done my best, account of yore lettin' daylight through Sawbuck Smith, nigh onto a dozen years ago."

Pride and reminiscence brightened Single Shot's face. The deadly old gunner he had downed had emptied many a saddle; sometimes a slayer's reward is gratitude, not vengeance.

"Let's likker up!" he exclaimed, heartily. "So yuh remember Sawbuck, account of some kinfolks of yores?"

"Uhuh." The Kid grinned. "Sawbuck was my Pap."

The way he said those last words made Dawson reach for leather. Not even the Kid quite realized then what did happen except that his own gun was out with a hairline edge. His pistol blast, at that short range, was a hammer blow of flame, needing no heavy slug to make it crushing. He had slipped inside the slayer's guard as he fired, and blazing powder seared his own cheek as Dawson dropped, knocked helpless by the crushing explosion.

The bullet itself, no more than tore a surface gash, but a mule kick in the stomach could not have stiffened Dawson more certainly. The Kid, machinelike, for all his speed, plucked the weapon from his enemy's useless fingers. [*Turn page*]

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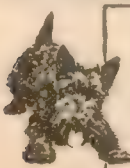

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"This gent ain't hurt much," he said as he whirled, his Colt covering the field, his eyes watching Dawson. "But stand back jest a minute."

Amazement held the crowd far enough away to prevent understanding of what the Kid said to the recovering outlaw.

"Single Shot, a long time ago I saved you for killin'. But I been learnin' things and didn't know it till just this minute. So I missed yuh on purpose. The poor fool that gets you, inherits yore notches, and Sawbuck Smith's, too. Reputation as a gunslinger killed my Pap, so I'm leavin' someone else to get this crop of notches. There'll be lots tryin', from now on. And mighty soon, too."

He tossed Single Shot's gun to the bar and deliberately turned his back. He declined invitations to drink, but paused long enough at the door to answer one of the questions hurled at him.

"Name's Jones," he said. "Shucks, mister, I never could hit a flock of barns, and I'm sort of lucky to be alive."

He mounted up and rode, certain that Single Shot would not name the man who had mocked him. Nor would Single Shot live long, for glory can not be buried. Every gunner in the southwest would be honin' for a try at him when this yarn got around, just for the glory of it.

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SHADOW OF BILLY THE KID

(Concluded from page 64)

we're going to have plenty building right along. Here, I'll toss on your saddle for you."

For a moment that evening, when he took his place at the supper table, Anson could not look his hosts in the eyes. Because there was a shadow down inside him. He hadn't taken sides in the Lincoln County war. He had told the truth about that. But he had killed two men. One, an assassin following him out of Lincoln one night. The man had fired twice in the darkness before Anson could unlimber his rifle. Then three men had opened fire on him at his own cowcamp, after they had eaten and started away. He had killed one and driven the other two off. Yes, he had slain twice, but in self-defense. Shadows of the border troubles, of Billy the Kid if you wanted to look at it that way. But shadows that would fade out with the years, with friends, maybe with a level-headed and gracious wife.

He looked up at last and met the smiles of Mr. and Mrs. Harley. He smiled back. It was good to be here.

THE HITCHING RAIL

(Continued from page 8)

Got a inquiry here from Walter Henry way down in the land o' crocodiles and tropical splendor near the Everglades o' Florida. Walter's askin' about the old land grants made to individuals in the great Southwest. Who had the power to make 'em, and jest who were the lucky people what received these kingly grants?

Kingly grants is sure a proper phrase, Walter, 'cause that's jest what they were. They were first made by the Spanish Crown, though it was carried on later by the Mexican government, and they sure created a lot o' disputes and bloodshed.

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[*Turn page*]

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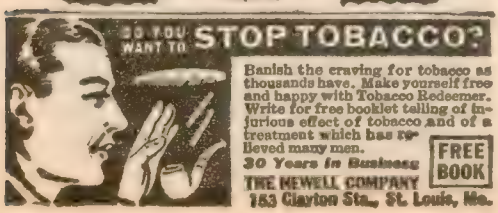

brought a lot o' Spanish grandees to this country to settle on their grants, but the venture failed because the time was even then past for the old monarchial feudal system.

The Estancia grant up in New Mexico was one of the biggest. It comprised nearly a million and a half acres of valuable land, and was granted to Don Bartolome Baca, said to be a lineal descendant of an ancient noble Spanish family.

Don Baca was possessed of very great wealth and they say he was generous and a public spirited citizen. He grazed his great herds over his immense tract o' land—greater than the state o' Delaware—and cultivated parts of it at times.

Squatters Move In

As the years passed many squatters moved in on Don Bartolome Baca's grant. Later, Mexico became a country independent o' Spain.

The last governor (Mexican) of the then province of New Mexico, Manuel Armijo, was granted by the President o' Mexico extraordinary powers for the disposition of lands on account of havin' been victorious in a battle with some Texas Rangers.

Out of the very heart of the Baca grant Governor Armijo carved a piece of nearly half a million acres, and conveyed it to Antonio Sandoval for "Services to the government of Mexico."

Sandoval, in turn, deeded it to a man named Nolan from whose heirs Joel P. Whitney, a Boston capitalist, purchased the grant, believin' the title to be okay. Meantime, the Otero family of New Mexico bought the claim to the Baca grant from the Baca heirs, then livin' in Mexico City.

With so many claimants, and a whole slew o' squatters, there was bound to be disputes and finally bloodshed. There was a final last-ditch fight between the Otero group and Whitney and his men.

Otero was killed and Whitney wounded mighty bad—eleven bullets holes in him.

The case was finally tried by the Supreme Court o' the United States and the grant rejected. All the territory contained in the famous Estancia grants reverted to the government and was thrown open for homestead entry.

So long, folks. Be seein' you, come next number, right here beside the old hitchin' rail. Best spot on earth to squat and spin yarns o' the great open spaces and the

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Buck Benson

OUR NEXT ISSUE

ONE of the penalties of being a peace officer is that so often you find yourself in the middle, with bullets coming both ways. It's an experience Walt Slade, the undercover lone wolf ranger known as El Halcon has known many times—and he faces it again in ROLLING WHEELS, next issue's featured novelet by Bradford Scott.

It looked for awhile down there in Texas as if Slade would be caught between the opposing forces of the ranchers, backed by the sheriff, and the nesters who had bought their land fair and square and were in no mood to be run out. But Walt Slade was never just a gun hung dummy. It was a brain as decisive as a steel trap as much as the blinding speed of his draw that made El Halcon known and feared wherever men plotted to enrich themselves at the cost of lives and property of helpless neighbors.

This exciting Walt Slade adventure begins when a group of prairie schooners roll over the hills and sway down upon land which Joel Longley, owner of the Swinging J, has always considered his. Here's a sample of the action:

In a thicket . . . seven men sat their horses and peered intently eastward.

Old Man Longley, owner of the Swinging J turned to his lean and silent foreman, Mart Merrit.

"It's another bunch, all right," he growled under his bristling and grizzled moustache. "A little one this time—just three wagons. Don't see any more comin' through the notch. Wait till they get opposite us then ride out and fan sideways. That'll catch the drivers broad on. I'll do the talkin'."

On came the rolling wheels, the great wains lurching and swaying as the horses, six to a wagon, strained at the traces. They reached the thicket, began to pass it.

There was a crashing of brush and the Swinging J cowboys fanned out of the brasade.

"Stop them wagons!" roared old Joel.

The startled drivers obeyed, casting scared glances at the hard-faced cattlemen.

Longley made a circular gesture with his hand.

"Turn 'em around and hightail back the way yuh come," he ordered. "Yuh ain't goin' to cross this range. We don't want—"

He never completed the sentence. With a rattling swish the canvas side of the foremost wagon dropped to the ground. Standing shoulder to shoulder in the wagon bed, rifles at the ready, were ten men.

One of them spoke, a towering broad-shouldered individual with a ruddy, forked beard and a brown leathery face that did not move a muscle.

[*Turn page*]

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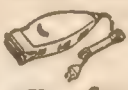

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"Listen, Texan," he said, "we-uns are from Kaintucky and we don't run easy. We're peaceful folks and ain't lookin' for no trouble, but we calc'late to be able to take care of any that comes our way. We're crossin' this stretch of country and if anybody tries to stop us, somebody is goin' to get hurt. We're ten to yore seven and we can shoot!"

Surprise held the cowmen still for a while. Joel Longley, no fool, knew they had him. And though it went against his tough old grain to give in, he was about to do so. Just then, by accident or design, a cowboy's hand brushed his gun butt. The Kentuckians took no chance. They knew the Texan's reputation. A wagoneer shot the cowboy through the arm.

Instantly the air rocked and quivered to the roar of gunfire. A ripple of flame ran the length of the wagon. The Winchesters boomed.

The swinging J hands were banging away with their sixshooters, whooping and yelling. . . .

And before old Joel Longley's bull bellow could get his men under control again and stop the shooting, two cowboys were wounded and three wagoneers slightly punctured.

So began the trouble on the Swinging J range, into which Walt Slade wandered just a few hours later, in time to save a wagoneer from drinking poison spring water, to side the nesters against hasty action on the part of the sheriff and thus earn himself that lawman's dislike.

Guns pop in White Water Valley and desperate men plot and ride to spin their schemes, to draw a web of tangled confusion about the eyes of the men they planned to despoil. But Walt Slade was not so easy to blind, or to fool. You'll see him unravel this plot and back his decisions with spitting six-guns as you ride along with ROLLING WHEELS in our next issue.

Two other thrilling novelets are also featured—the first being GREENHORN GUNMAN, by Gunnison Steele. Curly Spain was fast with a gun, but he'd never shot at a man, or been shot at. When his father, Big John Spain, was shot in the back in the Rainbow Bar, Curly strapped on his gun and went looking for Kurt Jance and his gunhawks. And there in the Rainbow Bar the bitter, terrible truth came to Curly Spain. He was afraid! Afraid of guns, afraid to draw and shoot it out!

In a land where men lived—and often died—by the six-gun, this kind of cowardice was like a brand for all to see and shun. Curly Spain suffered in his own private hell and he learned the truth the hard way—that a man must go through a baptism of fire to regain his self-respect.

GREENHORN GUNMAN is an exciting,

hard-hitting tale, but one with genuine people and genuine emotion, a story you'll long remember.

Your old friends Swap and Whopper will be present in a hilarious new novelet, HORSES DE COMBAT, by Syl MacDowell. Swap and Whopper tangle with a Jap saboteur landed by balloon, whose mission is to blow up a railroad trestle in advance of a troop train. Clad in their birthday suits, due to an unfortunate immersion in cold water, Swap and Whopper dash forth to do battle for their country. The results will make you cheer our wandering waddies—between howls of laughter!

Also in next issue's roundup are a choice collection of crackling short stories, solid entertainment every one, plus THE HITCHING RAIL and other features.

LETTERS FROM READERS

THE mail bag is bulging with so many fine letters from you folks out there that your editor had quite a baffling time trying to pick just the few that space permits us to print. For example there was a swell, long letter from Frank D. Compagnon, one of our contributors who has written some swell yarns, all about Cripple Creek, which Buck Benson wrote about in May THRILLING WESTERN. Here are some of the highlights from this letter:

Bob Womack found the first rich ore in Poverty Gulch while herdin' for Bennet and Myers in 1890. . . . Winfield Stratton, a carpenter, sold the Independence mine for eleven million dollars to an English concern. Verner Reed was the agent and made a million dollars as his commission. . . . This Nevada cow pasture has yielded up over four hundred million dollars so far and more to come. . . . Three full gauge railroads came up through the dark canyons to Cripple Creek. There were eleven good size towns with 50,000 people, 41 assay offices, 91 lawyers, 46 brokerage houses and 14 newspapers. What does the old town look like now? You ought to walk the almost deserted streets with me. Sorta nostalgic. I like to get out of my car and poke around in odd corners, chat with the old-timers and listen to them whip up old yarns. . . . They tell me there's still gold in them thar hills.—*Frank D. Compagnon, Colorado Springs, Colo.*

Thanks, Frank. Your letter is all the more interesting because a lot of folks have the idea that the west was all primitive wilderness. It wasn't so.

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[*Turn page*]

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and the result was some surprising luxury. Here's a letter from a fan with an idea:

My favorite stories are the Swap and Whopper novelets. Every time I purchase a copy of THRILLING WESTERN I read Swap and Whopper first. The Walt Slade novelets are good too. I'd like to see Swap and Whopper be the main characters in a movie.—*Eugene Hall, Buellton, Calif.*

Oh-oh, a sour note in the chorus:

I sure enjoyed SIX-GUN MAGPIE, by Donald Bayne Hobart. I wish I had it to read for the first time all over again. What I hate is Swap and Whopper—it is a lot of foolishness. And I don't always like the Hawk stories. But I can't blame you because you can't please everyone.—*Norbert Whalen, Gaspe Village, Que.*

Now there is our best friend and severest critic. Looks like we'll have to be on our toes to please the severe Mr. Whalen. He must like us though, friends—he goes right on buying THRILLING WESTERN. And we'll go right on buying the best stories we can get. Only one thing, Norbert—do you mind if we keep using Swap and Whopper? Most of our readers are plumb crazy about the ornery cusses. See the letter just above yours.

And here's a slightly left-handed compliment:

The March issue of THRILLING WESTERN was simply great. All the stories are fine, but I could use a little more action, so how about it, please?—*Virgil Degenstein, Anamoose, N. Dak.*

So there you are, folks! Keep your letters and postcards coming to The Editor, THRILLING WESTERN, 10 East 40th St., New York 16, N. Y.

Thanks to everybody! Be seein' you!

—THE EDITOR

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ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ON PAGE 51

1. William H. Bonney.
2. Colonel William F. Cody, the famed Buffalo Bill. "Pahaska" meant "Long Hair."
3. Benito Juarez.
4. A ring put on the end of a lariat. It is so arranged that the other end of the rope can be inserted to make a large slip loop for roping.
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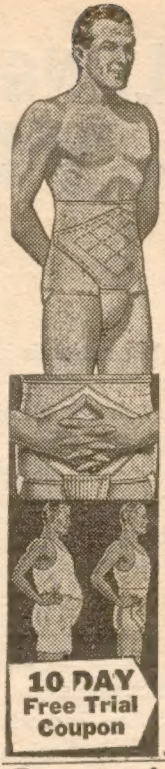

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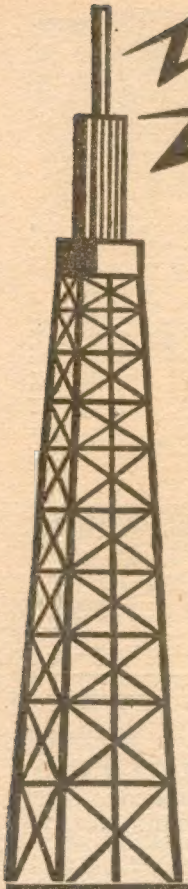

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